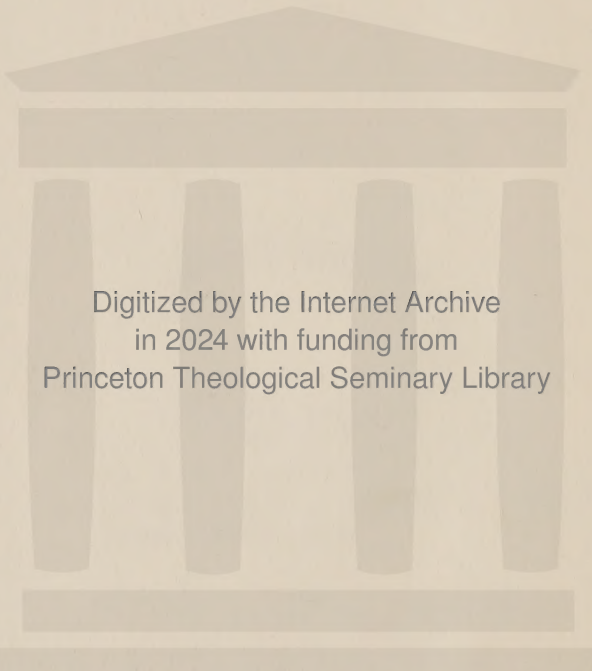






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Francis Asbury





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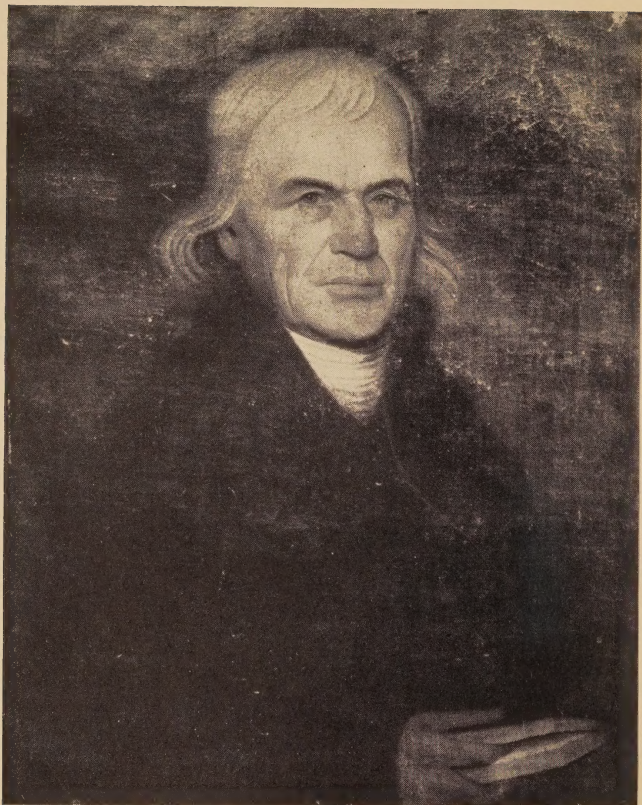
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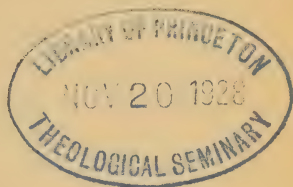
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#### FRANCIS ASBURY

This portrait was painted by an unknown artist. Tradition says that it was made for a society of Methodist women, and when the society disbanded the portrait was presented to Rev. Stephen Asbury Roszel. It remained in his family until after the Civil War, when it was presented to Judge Richard H. Tebbs, of Leesburg, Virginia, by George Roszel. From Judge Richard H. Tebbs it descended to his son, Hon. Charles B. Tebbs, of Washington, D. C., the present owner.

# FRANCIS ASBURY

*Founder of American Methodism and  
Unofficial Minister of State*



BY  
WILLIAM LARKIN DUREN

OF  
THE NORTH GEORGIA CONFERENCE  
METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SOUTH

New York  
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1928

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Set up and printed.  
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SET UP BY BROWN BROTHERS LINOTYPERS  
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TO

JOSEPH REID BINGHAM

A CHRISTIAN GENTLEMAN

CULTURED, GREAT-HEARTED, GENEROUS, NOBLE

A FRIEND AS TRUE AND UNSELFISH AS ANY MAN

EVER HAD



## PREFACE

The author does not claim that he has exhausted the material relating to Francis Asbury. This study, however, includes all that he has been able to find out from dependable sources, both direct and collateral.

Many people have rendered gracious assistance in the search for material. Particular acknowledgment is made of services rendered by the librarians of Drew Theological Seminary, Emory University, Candler School of Theology, Carnegie Library of Atlanta, The Georgia State Library, and the Library of Congress. The American University and Hon. Charles B. Tebbs, both of Washington, D. C., have made it possible to present two excellent portraits of Asbury. Among the many individuals who have given valued assistance are Bishops Warren A. Candler and Edwin D. Mouzon; Drs. Ezra Squier Tipple, Franklin N. Parker, Henry T. Carley, R. H. Bennett, W. A. Lambeth and Forrest J. Prettyman; Justices H. Warner Hill and S. Price Gilbert of the Supreme Court of Georgia; Miss Fannie Tompkins, and Messrs. J. R. Bingham and R. B. Eleazer. Acknowledgment is also due the following publishers: Smith & Lamar for permission to quote from Galloway, *Great Men and Great Movements*; G. P. Putnam's Sons for the use of a quotation from Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, and the

Epworth Press for permission to quote from Curnock, *Journal of John Wesley*.

In the plan of this study it has not been possible to deal with the events of Asbury's life in a consecutive way. For those, therefore, who may not be familiar with that period of Methodist history, the following biographical and historical outline will be of value.

- 1745. Francis Asbury born in Staffordshire, England, August 20 or 21.
- 1759. Asbury converted at the age of thirteen and a half years.
- 1759 to 1765. Served as apprentice to a harness maker. During this time he preached from three to five times a week.
- 1766. Traveled nine months in Staffordshire as supply for William Orpe.
- 1767. Admitted on trial in the Wesleyan connection, at the Conference in London, August 18, and stationed in Bedfordshire with James Glasbrook, who afterward came to America as a Presbyterian preacher.
- 1768. Appointed to Colchester.
- 1769. Serves Bedfordshire with Richard Henderson. At the Conference of this year Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmoor were sent as missionaries to America.
- 1770. Appointed to Wiltshire, South, with John Cattermole.
- 1771. Asbury attends the Conference at Bristol and volunteers for America. He and Richard Wright were accepted and sailed September 4, landing in Philadelphia, October 27. He began his itinerant career at once.
- 1772. On October 10, Asbury receives a letter from Mr.



Wesley appointing him to "act as assistant" in America.

1773. Thomas Rankin and George Shadford arrive from England, June 3. Rankin supersedes Asbury as assistant to Mr. Wesley. The first American Conference met in Philadelphia, July 14, with ten preachers present. Asbury was stationed in Baltimore with Robert Strawbridge, Abram Whitworth, and Joseph Yearbry.
1774. Boardman and Pilmoor return to England. Asbury and Rankin are stationed in New York and Philadelphia to change every three months.
1775. Asbury stationed in Norfolk. Mr. Wesley issues his "Calm Address."
1776. Asbury appointed to Baltimore. War troubles begin, and Asbury is fined for preaching in Maryland.
1777. Rankin and Rodda leave America. Asbury given no appointment. His chaise is shot through near Annapolis in Maryland.
1778. On March 10, Asbury retires to the home of Judge White in Delaware. Judge White arrested on suspicion of harboring Tories. Shadford leaves America.
1779. Asbury continues at Judge White's. Calls a Conference in Kent County, Delaware, April 18, and assumes control of the Societies. His appointment for the next year is "Delaware." The Virginia preachers meet at Brokenback church in Fluvanna County and vote to ordain themselves.
1780. Slavery agitation begins. Asbury has become a citizen of Delaware and goes to Baltimore, April 22. At the Virginia Conference held in Manakintown, the ordinance question is settled by the agreement to suspend the ordinances for one

- year. On September 16, Asbury wrote Mr. Wesley stating the terms of agreement and making appeal for relief. Asbury plans for a school.
1781. Asbury travels and preaches. Suspension of the ordinances is continued.
1782. The Conference approves Asbury as "general assistant," and he continues to travel.
1783. Peace with England declared. Asbury includes New York in his travels.
1784. On January 24, Asbury receives a letter from Mr. Wesley asking him to act as general assistant. On November 14, Asbury meets Dr. Coke at Barrett's Chapel and learns of Mr. Wesley's plan to ordain ministers and organize the American Church. Asbury declines to be ordained superintendent upon Mr. Wesley's appointment unless elected by the Conference. He is elected and ordained by the "Christmas Conference" held in Baltimore. Twelve elders and three deacons are ordained, and the "minute" declaring loyalty to Mr. Wesley is adopted by the Conference.
1785. Asbury begins his task of administration by holding his first Conference at Green Hill's house, near Louisburg, North Carolina. Cokesbury College founded.
1786. Asbury holds three Conferences and projects work in Kentucky.
1787. Bishop Coke makes arbitrary changes in the time of the Conferences, and is required to give a certificate that he will not take such liberty again.
1788. Seven Conferences are held. Asbury visits Georgia and Tennessee. Revivals break out and the membership of the church grows rapidly.
1789. Eleven Conferences held. The Council composed of the bishops and presiding elders holds its first

session, December 3. The "minute" regarding Mr. Wesley is rescinded by the Conference. Bishop Asbury presents resolutions to President Washington on behalf of the New York Conference.

1790. James O'Kelly opposes the Council and threatens Asbury. Wesley and Whitefield school in Georgia established. Kentucky visited. The Council holds its second session.
1791. Asbury extends the work into New England. Troubles arise with Hammett in Charleston. Mr. Wesley dies. The Council suspended.
1792. First General Conference meets in Baltimore. O'Kelly champions a measure to give the right of appeal to the Conference for a preacher who feels that his appointment does him an injury. It is defeated. The office of presiding elder is established by action of the General Conference. Union school in Pennsylvania established. O'Kelly withdraws from the church and begins a bitter attack upon Asbury.
1793. Slight loss in the membership results from the O'Kelly troubles.
1794. Cokesbury school in North Carolina founded. Work undertaken in Maine and New Hampshire.
1795. Judge White dies. Asbury goes into Vermont. Cokesbury College burned. Membership loss more than six thousand.
1796. Second General Conference held. Effort to make presiding elders elective fails. Membership loss continues.
1797. Bishops Coke and Asbury prepare notes on the Discipline. Ebenezer school in Virginia established. New England Conference organized.
1798. Asbury visits Maine and New Hampshire. Yellow fever scourge in coast cities.

- 1799. Tobias Gibson sent to Mississippi. Camp meetings inaugurated.
- 1800. Third General Conference held. Richard Whatcoat elected bishop. Efforts to force emancipation of slaves defeated. Asbury thinks of resigning on account of his health. Great revivals throughout the church.
- 1801. South Carolina agitated on account of the Address of the General Conference respecting slavery.
- 1802. Asbury travels constantly. His mother dies. The church has a year of great growth.
- 1803. Membership gain more than seventeen thousand, and total membership passes one hundred thousand.
- 1804. Fourth General Conference meets. Conference boundaries fixed. Missionaries are sent into Illinois.
- 1805. Year of normal development. Death takes some of best preachers.
- 1806. Bishop Whatcoat dies. Louisiana entered. Asbury wishes a called General Conference of seven members from each Conference to strengthen the episcopacy and to provide for a regular delegated General Conference, but Virginia defeats the plan.
- 1807. Asbury rides from Georgia to New Hampshire and back, and westward to Kentucky.
- 1808. Fifth General Conference enacts law providing for a delegated General Conference in the future. William M'Kendree elected bishop. Special edition of the Discipline leaving out the rule on slavery is authorized for use in South Carolina. Harry Dorsey Gough dies.
- 1809. The excessive toil of travel begins to tell upon Asbury, but he continues his way.
- 1810. Genesee Conference organized without direct au-

thority of the General Conference. Jesse Lee publishes his *History of the Methodists*.

- 1811. Asbury visits Canada.
- 1812. War with England begins. First delegated General Conference meets in New York. Lee, Shinn, and Snethen lead fight for elective presiding eldership but lose. Asbury desires leave to visit England, but is dissuaded from doing so by the Conference.
- 1813. Asbury writes his will. Prepares valedictory to the presiding elders. Greatest membership gain in the history of the church.
- 1814. Asbury has a serious illness near Lumberton, New Jersey. Bishop Coke dies on the way to establish a mission in British India and is buried in the Indian Ocean. Loss in membership due to the war with England.
- 1815. Asbury's strength fails, but he travels, distributes tracts, and collects his "mite subscription."
- 1816. Asbury has serious illness in South Carolina, but improves and continues his way toward Baltimore. Preaches his last sermon in Richmond, Virginia, March 24, and dies at the home of George Arnold near Fredericksburg, March 31.

During Asbury's American career about eighteen hundred preachers were received. Twenty-five of these withdrew, thirty-three were expelled, one hundred and thirty-one died in the service, and approximately nine hundred *located*. The location of preachers caused the greatest difficulty of Asbury's administration.

WILLIAM L. DUREN

*St. Mark Church, Atlanta*  
January 15, 1928





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CHAPTER I  
PRELIMINARY SURVEY

"Why is it that, often in hours of the deepest despondency, the listening to the rehearsal of the incidents and adventures of early times will arouse the soul to manly fortitude and buoyant hope?"

—LARRABEE, *Asbury and His Coadjutors*

"Francis Asbury is the most distinguished man that the Methodist Episcopal Church has ever produced, and the most important ecclesiastical personage that our country has ever seen."

—COGGSHALL, in *Methodist Quarterly Review*

"What a wonderful experience he must have had, this prophet of the wilderness! Who shall say where his influence, written upon the immortal souls of men, shall end?"

—PRESIDENT CALVIN COOLIDGE

". . . the tale of the way in which Francis Asbury dragooned Methodism into becoming the thing he wanted it to be is a tale worth telling. As a study in personality, this imperious marshal of the early circuit rider hosts offers a chance for a memorable 'psychograph.'"

—HUTCHINSON, in *The Christian Century*

"Francis Asbury, worn out in the service of God, entered into his eternal rest. It is well to revive the memory of his life in the minds of the Methodist people. Whoever helps to do that, either by tongue or pen, is a benefactor."

—BISHOP E. E. HOSS

# FRANCIS ASBURY

## CHAPTER I

### PRELIMINARY SURVEY

PROBABLY no man of the pioneer days has a more distinct claim to the grateful homage of the American people than Francis Asbury. Surely, few characters offer such a rich and splendid opportunity for biographical interpretation. This does not mean that his life is easy to interpret to the satisfaction of the multitudes who share the fruits of his evangelistic toil and devotion. He occupied such a unique place in the religious development of the nation, rendered such conspicuous service in such an unselfish way, and wrought to such tremendous purpose in shaping the thought and character of the whole people, that it has never been easy to do him justice as a religious and social force in the making of the nation. He labored under conditions which were calculated to develop a spirit of ecclesiastical autocracy; but his piety deepened as his power increased, and his goodness and greatness found exquisite setting in his perfect simplicity. In addition to this, there is the difficulty of reproducing in our thinking the atmosphere of the social and economic life to which he belonged.



The volume of the material relating to Asbury has been reduced by the passing years, but there has been a deepening of the sense of obligation for his splendid moral and spiritual leadership. The Journal which he kept is the source from which we must get the larger part of our information regarding his life and work. On account of the stress of circumstances under which he kept his Journal, his abbreviated style, and his reticence concerning things affecting himself, these records are much less informing than they might have been. His disconnected style and the abruptness of his thought transitions have made many references in his letters unintelligible to those who undertake to read them now. Added to this is the fact that much of the literature produced by his apologists is so saturated with the extravagances of eulogy as to conceal his faults and thus give the reader an incomplete and one-sided picture of the man. There were reasons, perhaps, at the time for such impassioned writing in defense of Asbury; but time has answered, more effectively than any apologist could do, the attacks of those whose charges expressed more of self-interest and personal feeling than of truth.

The literature concerning Asbury which has been produced outside of church circles is unimportant and unilluminating. Dr. George Eayers of London calls attention to the fact that the *Historian's History of the World*, in its many and pretentious volumes, does not mention Coke, Asbury, Garretson, or Cartwright; and that H. G. Wells' *Outline of History* makes no reference to Asbury, but twice alludes to Ayesha, the "mischievous old lady" who was the favorite wife of Mohammed.<sup>1</sup> This same silence occurs in practically

<sup>1</sup> *Methodist Review*, New York, 1924, p. 22.

all the secular historians who have undertaken to analyze the forces of our national development.

We do not need at this time a defense of the character or a eulogy of the virtues of this ancient worthy of the Methodist hosts, but a study that really interprets the man. The counsel of an eminent teacher of church history is: "Do not be afraid to tell the truth about Asbury; he is great enough to stand it." Surely that is good advice for any writer of biography, for honest biography must deal with virtue in its true setting. Character study that depends upon concealment for a part of its value is of doubtful merit, to say the least, for it means little unless there is back of it a man whose life story is worth knowing. To put it in the phrase of Mahatma Gandhi, the brilliant Indian philosopher: "Of what elevation to man is a method of broadcasting when you have only drivel to send out?"

Efforts looking toward the publication of a biography of Bishop Asbury began immediately after his death. At the session of the Baltimore Conference in 1817, Bishop M'Kendree urged that steps be taken to compile and publish a suitable biography, and the minutes show that a committee was appointed to collect material and secure a biographer. They secured the services of Dr. Samuel K. Jennings, a physician, whose work was to be submitted to the committee for approval. Dr. Jennings prepared a manuscript of 269 folio pages, and on June 15, 1819, the committee met and twice read through the manuscript. They declined to recommend its publication, giving six reasons for their action in the case: 1. The work contained "too much foreign and unnecessary matter; particularly . . . the tracing of the cause of truth from the time of Adam to the day

of Pentecost; the abridgement of Mosheim; the frequent and large quotation from the Edinburgh Review, Wilberforce, Simpson's Plea," etc. 2. Because it was "radically defective," in that it contained "no syllable" of the parentage and early history of Asbury. 3. It contained "a variety of sentiments on doctrines and ecclesiastical polity which we deem at least questionable." 4. The "style is not carefully attended to." 5. The spirit was controversial and tended to goad others. 6. The reasoning was "inconclusive and unsatisfactory." This report was signed by Nelson Reed, Joshua Wells, S. G. Roszel, Thomas Burch, Alfred Griffith, J. Emory, and Beverly Waugh.<sup>2</sup> The biography was not published.

In 1821 the Journal of Asbury was published, and for a time stopped the clamor for a biography; but the Journal afforded only a temporary satisfaction. In the years since 1821 at least ten volumes dealing with the life of Asbury have come from the press. A magazine article attributed to Edward Everett Hale says of one of the earliest biographies: "Mr. Strickland's book is not altogether what we might desire. It seems as though a man really inspired with his subject, in writing such a biography, would hardly have failed to have invested it with a more powerful dramatic interest, and would have carried us more thoroughly into the very life of the individual, instead of turning aside here and there to commonplace moralizing, or to detail facts which have no immediate connection with the subject of his work."<sup>3</sup> Of still another effort we have the following: "Here is as disappointing a book as I have

<sup>2</sup> *Methodist Review*, New York, 1831, pp. 82ff.

<sup>3</sup> *The Christian Examiner*, Boston, Vol. LXVI, p. 382.

read in a long time . . . the book itself proves to be almost a complete dud.”<sup>4</sup> Of the last book from the press, a reviewer expresses disappointment that the author failed to elaborate the facts with his own opinions.

These criticisms indicate primarily a dissatisfaction with the efforts with which they deal, but concealed in the heart of them is a much more radical matter. It is the problem of digesting out of a mass of incident and of unsystematized acts of administration such an interpretation of the character and heart of Bishop Asbury as would satisfy the great body of American Methodists. This pioneer was not only the most unique and original of the great men of early Methodism; but, on account of his spirit of self-sacrifice and his unparalleled achievements, he is regarded with a peculiar reverence bordering upon worship. These criticisms, it is just to say, reveal the real difficulties of the task, and should not be taken as reflections upon the ability of the biographers.

After Dr. Jennings' manuscript was abandoned it was more than thirty years before another effort was made, and in the meantime the material collected was destroyed in the fire that burned the Book Concern in New York. This disaster made the difficulty of writing greater than ever. The various efforts that have been put forth since are based largely upon Asbury's Journal and have dealt with him as a pioneer, pathfinder, incessant traveler, sufferer, and saintly soul. But with all that has been written, there seems still to be room for others to exercise their gifts of interpretation, for each new book that comes from the press is

<sup>4</sup> *The Christian Century*, Chicago, Vol. XLIV, p. 691.

hailed with the expectant hope that it may cause the mighty man of the early days to live again.

The premiership of Francis Asbury among church founders and religious leaders of the New World is probably one of the most unchallenged facts connected with the history of our country. Such eminence is not accorded him by the unanimous consent of the generation to which he belonged; for, in common with all outstanding men, he had to endure a sharpness of criticism and a fierceness of opposition from his contemporaries which would be difficult to believe if it were not that the records are too plain and unequivocal to be mistaken. Neither is his greatness due to the official recognition which he received at the hands of his brethren. Professor John Miley well observes in this connection that "it was the man who made the office," and that "it would have fallen with feebleness at its very beginning" but for the fact that Asbury's character lifted it out of obscurity.<sup>5</sup> The obtuseness of the writers of American history has been such that they have found no place for this mighty organizer of the religious forces of the early years. The canonization of Bishop Asbury, therefore, has been effected in the hearts of the multiplying millions of Methodists, whose head he was at the beginning and whose future was largely determined by his consecrated genius. With the spread of Methodist influence in America and throughout the world, it is but natural that increasing attention should be paid to this great captain and that he should come into his rightful recognition as a constructive force in the national life.

<sup>5</sup> Miley, *Methodist Centennial Conference*, p. 134.



The revival of interest in Asbury tends to show that he was much more than an ecclesiastical patriarch of American Methodism. His true and complete biography will never be written until very definite attention shall have been paid to his contribution to the social and political life of the nation. To be sure, his first interest was neither social nor political; it was religious. He was not as active politically as was Mr. Wesley, nor as daring as Dr. Coke; but he kept in contact with governors, he sought approach to legislatures, and he cultivated the friendship of President Washington. His interest in anti-slavery measures led him to approach the governor of North Carolina,<sup>6</sup> and he signed petitions to the legislatures of both North Carolina and Virginia. He records his rejoicing when Nicholas Snethen is made chaplain of Congress.<sup>7</sup> His frequent observations upon roads, bridges, ferries, the steamboat, and the sanitary conditions in the homes of the people witness to his great interest in the public welfare; but above all matters of internal improvement he unfailingly puts questions relating to the integrity, the sobriety, and the moral quality of the citizen.

The American people are entitled to know this spiritual chieftain of the early days; and it is to the credit of those who have written about him that they have earnestly attempted to portray his character, to do justice to his fame, and to render a service to mankind in this way. It is a labor worth while to discover the virtues of his simple and direct ministry from door to door over the vast and expanding settlements in the wilds

<sup>6</sup> Crowther, *Life of Coke*, p. 185.

<sup>7</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 376.

of America; and it is no part of the purpose of this book to subtract from the interest in other books which tell that story. As will be seen from the citations, all these books have furnished suggestion and help, and their contributions have been much greater than will appear from references to the various texts. In no small degree they have supplied the subsoil in which this book has grown; and for whatever merit this study may have the author owes much to his predecessors in this field.

The plan of this book does not follow Bishop Asbury up and down the country in those forty-five years of ceaseless activity as an itinerant preacher, and as a master in bringing order and system out of the social and religious chaos of the unregulated conditions of colonial life. There is a real charm about the prodigious toils of an invalid prophet and a perennial interest in the deeds of a man of iron, no matter what the cause to which he may give himself. There is romance in the restless abandon of energy, though it be but a waterfall plunging over the face of a cliff. The psychology that can conquer such handicaps of body and of circumstance has a special appeal and challenges attention. But it was not through toil and suffering that Francis Asbury came at last to be the triumphant leader of the most militant spiritual host on the American continent. To allow interest in him to rest upon his travels and his sufferings is to submerge the achievements of the mightiest apostle of modern times in a sea of senseless commiseration; to attribute his fame to the greatness of the church which he founded is to make of him one of the accidents of history and an



object of pity; and to accord him a place in history upon any other foundation than the sterling virtues of his own soul is to quench the light of the mightiest spiritual beacon that ever blazed on this continent.

The story of Francis Asbury is a religious classic, but it is more than that. It constitutes one of the thrilling and romantic and inspiring chapters of our history, and its influence will abide as long as moral values have a place among the factors which enter into the making of life and character. A diamond with some of its facets unpolished is none the less a diamond, but it cannot be fully appreciated because of those unpolished facets. So it is with a great man whose life-story is not fully told; he is still a great man, but the world looks for the granite pillars upon which his fame rests and is disappointed when it does not find them. It is not the purpose of this book to *create* a hero or to *make* a biography; its one aim is to interpret a life, and the hope of its author will be fulfilled if it may contribute something toward polishing another facet of the wonderfully inspiring story of Francis Asbury.

The plan, as will appear from the Contents, begins with a brief account of his parentage and early years, and undertakes to trace each separate phase and activity up to the evolution of a great ecclesiastical and national figure, whose permanent influence and power abide as fixed pillars of our national life. In the pursuit of this aim use will be made of all sources available, both direct and collateral, and references will be given for the benefit of those who may desire to look more carefully and fully into the authorities for the matters discussed. In all cases where Asbury's Journal is

manifestly the original source of information, that will be cited as the authority. At the end of the book will be found a bibliography listing the principal sources which have been consulted. With this understanding of purpose and plan, we turn to the story itself.

CHAPTER II  
PARENTAGE AND EARLY HISTORY

"I was born in Old England, near the foot of Hampstead Bridge . . ., on the 20th or 21st day of August, in the year of our Lord 1745. My father's name was Joseph, and my mother's, Elizabeth Asbury: they were people in common life; were remarkable for honesty and industry, and had all things needful to enjoy."

. . . . .

"I remember when I was a small boy and went to school, I had serious thoughts, and a particular sense of the being of God; and greatly feared both an oath and a lie."

. . . . .

"I was awakened, as I think, when about thirteen years six months old; at the age of sixteen I began to read and pray in the public congregation."

. . . . .

"When about twenty-one I went through Staffordshire and Gloucestershire, in the place of a travelling preacher; and the next year through Bedfordshire, Sussex, etc."

. . . . .

"I feel my spirit bound to the New World, and my heart bound to the people, though unknown."

—*Asbury's Journal*

## CHAPTER II

### PARENTAGE AND EARLY HISTORY

THE story of the ancestry and early years of Francis Asbury is soon told, for there seems to be no detailed record concerning them. No imposing shrine marks the place where he was born, and no historic family of noble blood is brought forward to explain the character and achievements of this far-famed prophet. He simply came as the barbarian conquerors came to Rome, and he was revealed in his coming. Surely no other man could say more truly than he, "I am what I am by the grace of God"; and no other life illustrates more completely the all-sufficient grace of God to do for us and through us "exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think."

Asbury himself furnishes the most that we know concerning his family and his early years, and practically all of this information is to be found in his Journal. In the "Emory Collection" of manuscripts at Drew Seminary is a letter to his parents under date of February 14, 1790, in which he asks about "Sarah Rogers" and "John Rogers." These were evidently relatives of his mother, concerning whom she had written him. He tells us in his Journal that his father was Joseph Asbury, who was born about 1713, reckoning from his age at the time of his death. His father was

a gardener for the rich; he was industrious and he was poor. His mother was Elizabeth Rogers Asbury, born about 1715 and descended from respectable Welsh stock on her paternal side. The family lived first at the foot of Hampstead Bridge, about four miles from the city of Birmingham, but moved to the village of Barre, about a mile distant, when Francis was only a child. There they spent the greater part of their days on earth, Joseph Asbury dying in 1798 and his wife in 1802. They had only two children, Francis and Sarah, and the latter died in infancy. With these few facts we have told all that is definitely known of the birth, the residence, the temporal circumstances, and the death of the parents of Francis Asbury.<sup>1</sup>

As one would naturally expect, Asbury goes more into detail in discussing the religious aspects of his home life. He says that his parents were not religious up to the time of the death of Sarah, his sister. To use his own phrase, his "mother was a woman of the world." In a letter to his parents, dated September 7, 1793, he refers to their lack of piety thus: "You have been witnesses to my many midnight walks when I came home to hide appearances from my poor ungodly, yet otherwise kind mother."<sup>2</sup> His meaning in the letter is not clear, except as to the lack of religious experience upon the part of his mother. The Journal says that on account of her great sorrow she developed a melancholia, from which she was not relieved for many years; and that her interest in religion was the result of the sorrow which drove her to the Scriptures for consolation and hope. She was converted and for

<sup>1</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. II, pp. 157, 257; Vol. III, p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> Drew MSS.

fifty years was a consecrated and devoted servant of Christ in the village where she lived. Asbury intimates that the responsibility for religious leadership in his home rested upon his mother, of whom he says: "My mother strongly urged my father to family reading and prayer." It is equally plain, also, that his acquaintance with the Methodists was due largely to his mother's interest, and that she led him in the exercise of his spiritual gifts, such as reading the Scriptures in public and attendance upon the means of grace provided in that day.

Joseph Asbury was less conspicuous in a religious way, according to the modest account of his son, than was his wife. The indication is that he was slow to undertake the responsibilities of family worship, if he did at all, and he does not appear in connection with any of the pilgrimages to hear the Methodists. These things do not mean that Joseph Asbury was not a good man, and even a genuinely converted man; but rather that he was not the most religiously assertive member of the household. He could scarcely be thought of as being out of sympathy with the long-continued Methodist services which were held in his home, and when he died a Mr. Phillips of Birmingham wrote Bishop Asbury that "he died very happy."

In the more temporal things Joseph Asbury displayed sterling qualities of mind and soul. His aspirations for Francis were such that he would have made any sacrifice necessary to secure his son's education; from the beginning he bent his energies in that direction. He did not give up his purpose until the boy had been driven to such a distaste for school, on account of the brutal treatment received from his teacher, that further



effort seemed futile. This silence of Asbury should not be taken as a reflection upon his father's character, but more as indicating that his influence was overshadowed by the "quick bodily powers and masculine understanding" of his mother. In this same connection it is to be remembered that he was not giving a comparative estimate of his father and his mother, but seeking to give a bare outline of his family history for the sake of those who might be interested in him as one of the pioneers in the history of American Methodism.

In this humble home at the foot of Hampstead Bridge, near Birmingham, Francis Asbury was born on the 20th or 21st day of August, 1745. It was perfectly natural that the subdued atmosphere of his home during his early years should have induced in him a serious and reflective turn of mind. He says that as a child he had serious thoughts of the being of God and that he feared both an oath and a lie. There is evidence of religious supersensitiveness in the fact that he had such an abhorrence of the profanity and deceit of his playmates, and that he sought refuge and solace in prayer when cruelly mistreated by his teacher. All this together seems to imply that there was laid in his child mind a deep temperamental foundation for the facts of religious experience which were to come later. He certainly had at an early age a sense of moral responsibility which is not common to children. But if the somber atmosphere of Asbury's childhood gave him a seriousness beyond his years, it may be said for its justification that it turned his mind into channels of thought which saved him from the intellectual and moral dissoluteness which filled the polite literature of that day.

As has been intimated, the educational efforts in behalf of Asbury were less successful than were those for the development of his religious life. From the human point of view this was the one real calamity of his youth, if not of his whole career. The seriousness of his educational deficiency is revealed in his early correspondence. He was not illiterate, but he undoubtedly lacked the refinements of education. The opportunities for the education of the humbler folk were meager enough at best, but the circumstances of Asbury's schooling seem to have been unbearably bad. It does not appear that the teacher was incapable, but that his brutality was such as utterly to discourage the boy and to give him a positive antipathy for school. His deep religious feelings caused him to read the sermons of Whitefield and Cennick and other good books, and in this way he kept abreast of the best religious thinking of the times and stored his mind for the conquests of future years.

After he left school Asbury spent a short time in the home of one of the "wealthiest and most ungodly families in the parish." Of this experience he says: "Here I became vain, but not openly wicked." He then served six years as an apprentice in a home where he was well treated, and where he evidently had opportunity for the exercise of his religious inclinations. With his conversion in his fourteenth year began the definite development of his Christian life. At sixteen he was a local preacher, and at twenty-one supplied nine months for William Orpe in Staffordshire circuit.<sup>3</sup> He was admitted to the Conference at the session in London,

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Bishop Asbury to Dr. Benson, Candler School of Theology MSS.

August 18, 1767, and was stationed in Bedfordshire with James Glasbrook; in 1768 his appointment was Colchester; in 1769 it was Bedfordshire with Richard Henderson; in 1770 Wiltshire, South, with John Cattermole; and in 1771 "America."<sup>4</sup>

When Mr. Wesley called for volunteers for America, little did he dream that he was speaking among others to a man who was being haunted by the impression that God had chosen him for that particular field of labor; but such was the case. It is stated that this Conference at Bristol was the only British Conference that Asbury ever attended as a preacher. He offered himself for service in America and was accepted. His remaining days in England were spent in preparation for his departure, which occurred on September 4, 1771.

In connection with this account of Asbury's early history there are two observations which it seems proper to make. The first has to do with the singular providence of God which brought such opposite types as Dr. Coke and Francis Asbury to stand side by side in the same high and responsible task. Dr. Coke was an only son of wealthy and socially distinguished parents; Francis Asbury was an only son of poor and socially unknown parents—he was dugged from the pit of social obscurity. Thus we are brought to realize that the providence of God is more potent in fashioning destiny than is any historic blood stream, any inheritance of family prestige, or any background of human culture. The lack of these things, of course, is in no sense a virtue; but the purposes of God are not dependent upon and do not wait for channels of human making.

<sup>4</sup> *English Minutes*, Vol. I, pp. 70, 75, 83, 90, 98.

A second fact worthy of note is that two of the five years which Asbury spent in the English itinerancy were passed in Bedfordshire. A hundred years before, this field had been the scene of John Bunyan's immortal labors. In view of Asbury's religious nature and tuition this connection was calculated to make a tremendous impression upon his soul, and it would naturally find expression in his ministry. What better background could he have had for the type of ministry which he was to give to America than the haunts out of which came that classic of all lands and all tongues, *Pilgrim's Progress*? The very fact that Asbury's devotional life had much in common with that of Bunyan would tend to make Bunyan's book the subject of his lonely meditations as he explored the unbroken forests of the New World, and his association with the scenes out of which it came would make it as a part of his own soul.

Asbury bade his parents a tender and affectionate good-by. They mingled their tears with his, but God had called him and he could not stay. He never saw them again, but his abiding affection for them is told in his letters to his mother and in the unfailing solicitude with which he provided for their need. Out of his meager salary he made provision for the wants of his parents until they had no more earthly need. At one time he thought of going back to them, at another he considered bringing them to America; but neither course seemed possible or advisable. He never recrossed a single league of the sea over which he traveled on his journey to the New World, except in those unquenchable yearnings of his devoted heart.

When Asbury offered himself for missionary service

the evangelistic enthusiasm that was beginning to sweep over England had not yet created a very acute sense of responsibility for the spiritual welfare of English colonists beyond the sea. His friends looked upon his venture as a reckless enterprise prompted by fanatical religious zeal. Three women from one of the circuits which he had traveled in England wrote to Asbury's mother inquiring about him and condoling with her in the loss of her son. They assured her that it was "madness" that caused him to take such a reckless step.<sup>5</sup> In this diagnosis Asbury was in great company, for he was not the first spiritual adventurer who was thought to be beside himself, nor is he among the least of those who have followed the gleam of a great spiritual aspiration.

Such is the simple story of the home life and the beginnings out of which Francis Asbury came. He needs neither emblem nor crest to guarantee his fame. No eugenic theory is either necessary or sufficient to explain such a man as he was. He is revealed by the church which he established, and he is explained by "the blood of Jesus Christ" which "cleanseth us from all sin." In crossing the broad Atlantic he slept on the hard boards of a laggard ship, but he bore a spiritual empire in his heart.

<sup>5</sup> Drew MSS.

CHAPTER III  
BEGINNINGS IN AMERICA



"The ministry of Methodism is a ministry of toil."

—LEROY M. LEE, *Life of Jesse Lee*

"If God does not acknowledge me in America, I will soon return to England."

—*Asbury's Journal*

"In the following year (1771) another, the most important actor who ever appeared from England in America, took his place on the continent—Francis Asbury.

—DIXON, *Tour in America*

"Humiliating indeed was our condition. Not a man in holy orders among us; and against us formidable combinations formed; not so much at first among the laity as the clergy."

—THOMAS WARE, in *Methodist Magazine*

"One fears to speculate on what might have been the fate of American Methodism had such a cleric as Charles Wesley controlled it at the critical juncture. Fortunately for his own reputation and for his brother's work, this was not the case. Although Asbury had few intellectual gifts comparable to theirs, he possessed a loyalty, a determination, and a soundness of judgment which enabled him to hold intact the thin lines of his little army until the propitious moment came for advance and conquest."

—CADMAN, *Three Religious Leaders of Oxford*



## CHAPTER III

### BEGINNINGS IN AMERICA

THERE is no single incident in the record of Francis Asbury's early years that might not have happened to any other boy of that day and of his station in life. The career that made those years interesting began the day that he responded to Mr. Wesley's call for volunteers for America. It is not likely that his experience on the English circuits furnished him with much that was of direct value on the vast and uncultivated circuits of the New World. His own profound Christian experience, the absolute commitment of himself to the task for which he had volunteered, and his unusual endowment of common sense were the chief furnishings which he brought to his great task. In the full commitment of himself to the American field, all uncertainty as to his future was removed. He was a veteran from the start; his allegiance was not that of a season, but of steadfast devotion to a supreme task, the full import of which was far beyond his comprehension. Through his own religious experience he was to bring the passion of Christ to bear upon the multitudes of the new field, and his good sense would help him to relate his message to the need of all those to whom he might be privileged to minister.

It seems proper at this point to speak a word of caution as to the frame of mind in which we should approach the study of this remarkable man. The type of mind and of ministry represented in Francis Asbury is such as to require a sympathetic heart and a restrained enthusiasm in those who would understand him. It is easy, for instance, to reach the superficial conclusion that he was just one of the fanatical enthusiasts of a particular period, and so to dismiss him from consideration. On the other hand, it is equally possible to measure him by one's own enthusiasm rather than by the facts of history, and in that way to form an estimate expressing more the extravagance of personal sentiments than a true interpretation of character. Either course would mean injustice to a really great man. Let us, therefore, lay aside the traditions as to the man and his work and forget the rigorous Puritanism which influenced the piety of that day, that we may come to know this leader of the pioneer days of American history.

One thing must be kept in mind in connection with Asbury's coming to America: no act was ever more completely and entirely a venture of faith. America at that time offered nothing to any man whose first interest was himself. Trade possibilities did not enter into the choice of this spiritual cavalier. He arrived at Bristol to begin a journey of more than three thousand miles without a penny in his pocket, and with no resource except the promise of Jesus in his great missionary command. He had a fixed conviction that the people of the New World needed the gospel of salvation, and he believed steadfastly in the Christ who had promised to be with his messenger whithersoever he

might go on that mission. In that faith he had offered himself, and in that same faith he came to Bristol to begin his journey. Friends in that city fitted him out with clothes and provided ten pounds for all his needs.<sup>1</sup> Beyond that meager provision was no one but God; but through forty-five years on his wide, wide circuit Asbury found in Him an unfailing supply.

On the 27th day of October, 1771, he landed in Philadelphia, where, as he tells us, his heart was humbled by the affectionate welcome of his new friends and comrades in Christ. But he was not interested in ceremonies of introduction, and the moment his foot touched American soil the conquest of the continent for Christ was on in dead earnest. He tarried not for greetings, nor waited for some opening to appear; at once he was off on the one business for which he had come to this strange land. When he had been in America but seventeen days he had preached in both Philadelphia and New York, and had established a new preaching place at the home of Peter Van Pelt on Staten Island. Before a month had passed he had by his own example inaugurated that itinerant system which was destined to keep a Methodist preacher at the end of every trail and in the remotest settlements on American soil.

During the first year Asbury was Mr. Wesley's assistant and as such gave himself in a sacrificial way to the whole task. What a year that was! What a circuit he established! He preached in twenty-five settlements which he names, besides the scores of private homes where he had appointments. To New York and Philadelphia he added Mairnock, New Rochelle,

<sup>1</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 12.

Kingsbridge, Rye, New-City, Staten Island, Chester, East Chester, West Chester, West-Farms, Amboy, Burlington, New Mills, Bohemia, Wilmington, New Castle, Trenton, Greenwich, Gloucester, Bristol, Haddonfield, Bloomingdale and Newtown. While he rode that circuit, extending over parts of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, he read Wesley's notes on the Old Testament and Hammond's notes on the New Testament. Best of all, when they came to Philadelphia for the Conference in July, 1773, the membership of the Methodist Societies in America had been doubled.<sup>2</sup>

The establishment of the Methodist Church, it should be understood, was vastly more than a matter of personal or even evangelistic enthusiasm. It involved a grappling with problems which were as real as life itself. The difficulties began to appear with the increase of the roster of English missionaries, for then came the inevitable clash of temperament and judgment. In the spring of 1773 Thomas Rankin and George Shadford arrived, Rankin with authority from Mr. Wesley to supersede Asbury as general assistant. The practical mind of Asbury was quick to discern the administrative ability of his successor, but with it he saw his manifest weakness as a preacher.<sup>3</sup> The ability and temperament of Asbury were such as to make it difficult for him to adapt himself to the plans of a man who was uncommunicative and lacking in discernment, as Rankin appeared to be. Dr. Charles J. Little speaks of Rankin as "austerely earnest, untiring in his devotion to his Master, but without unusual gifts of mind

<sup>2</sup> *Minutes of the Conferences, 1773 to 1813.*

<sup>3</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 75.

or character.” \* This opinion may be a little severe, but it was not far wrong; for whatever good he accomplished by his enforcement of discipline was largely offset by his determined nature and his inability to deal judiciously with the problems connected with the political crisis then approaching.

Asbury did not allow his difference of opinion to sweep him off his feet, but submitted to the authority of Rankin and pursued his task with unabated vigor. Within four years of the arrival of Rankin and Shadford, Asbury, the youngest but the staunchest and sturdiest of all the Wesleyan missionaries, was left to hold the field alone. He resolved to remain at his post of duty at whatever cost, in order that the shepherdless sheep of the continent might not be scattered and lost through the confusion of war. It is a great tribute to the poise and character of the man that he was able to remain, and to overcome the indiscretions of Rankin, the Toryism of Rodda, and the unwise interference of Mr. Wesley in the bitter contest with his home land.

War, bad as it is, was not the greatest problem which confronted the struggling Methodists. All of Mr. Wesley's early missionaries to America were unskilled laborers, and this is true both as respects their meager educational culture and their lack of ecclesiastical ordination. Pilmoor was trained at Kingswood school, but no other of the regular missionaries had received even that much training. Asbury's ecclesiastical handicaps deprived his mission of a very potent element of religious appeal. He was an unordained man, and his commission was from a body of Christians which had

\* Little, *Proceedings of the Methodist Centennial Conference*, p. 217.



no recognized and established ecclesiastical status. His real credential was his passion for souls, and it was that which made a place for the Methodist movement in the religious life of the world. But there was not a religious unit in all America that might not sneer at the irregularity of the whole enterprise. Thomas Ware has well expressed the plight of the Societies: "Humiliating indeed was our condition. Not a man in holy orders among us; and against us formidable combinations formed."<sup>5</sup> When adults or the children of the Methodists were baptized, they were forced to go to the altar of a church which had well-nigh universally spurned and outlawed the whole movement; and when they received the symbols of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, it had to be from the grudging hands of a clergy whose moral character was too often a matter of open question.

In addition to what has been set forth already, there was a constant loss of ministers who were not able to bear the physical hardships which the itinerant service imposed, and of still others who were not willing to make the social sacrifice necessitated by the nature of the work. In this way the tried and trained men dropped out from year to year and Asbury was forced to fall back on raw recruits if the field were to be cultivated at all. The amazing thing is that the whole movement did not collapse at the very beginning. It probably would have done so except for the genius and the consecration of Asbury.

No missionary was ever more loyal to his task and his people than was he, and nowhere can there be found a greater test of loyalty than that imposed upon the

<sup>5</sup> *Methodist Quarterly*, New York, 1832, p. 97.

determined soul of Asbury during the terrible years of the Revolution. He had to care for a situation created by the indiscretions of his associates, he had to live down angry suspicions against Englishmen, and he had to bear the rather irritating taunts of those who left him with the whole task. Thomas Ware says that, after Rankin had fled to the British lines in Philadelphia, he "declared from the pulpit that it was his belief that God would not revive his work in America until they submitted to their rightful sovereign, George the Third; and in a similar strain wrote to Mr. Asbury." To this Asbury replied by reaffirming his own attachment to America, expressing the belief that the American people would never be satisfied with less than independence and adding that he had a "presentiment that they would get it."<sup>6</sup> Thus, when the storms were gathering, he refused to desert the people to whom he had given his heart, and always underneath his reticence there was an unmistakable loyalty to his adopted home.

No one with a discerning mind can read the story of the beginnings of the Methodist Church in America without being made to feel that the hand of God was in it all. It originated out of circumstances and conditions which were wholly unplanned, and which were certainly without purpose of creating a new ecclesiasticism. Its unfolding was largely in the minds and hearts of unordained men of limited attainments, but of sure faith. It developed a polity which was practical, rather than ecclesiastical and traditional, fashioned for the emergencies of a world that was new and undeveloped. If this be true of the organization, surely it cannot be doubted that Francis Asbury was the provi-

<sup>6</sup> *Methodist Quarterly*, New York, 1832, p. 102.



dential man of the days of the church's founding. In September, 1774, he says, "My mind is much exercised about going to Gibraltar," <sup>7</sup> and again in February, 1775, he says of the entreaty to go to Antigua, "I feel inclined to go," <sup>8</sup> and it was his lack of ordination that decided the matter. If Rankin had remained in America as "general assistant" to Mr. Wesley, Asbury probably would have found another field of labor. Indeed, Mr. Wesley issued a recall for Asbury, but absence in the wilderness, the Revolutionary War, and the ultimate organization of the Methodist Church constituted the answer of God to the summons. In this way Asbury was saved for the building of the most mobile and aggressive spiritual and ecclesiastical unit in the New World.

<sup>7</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 145.

CHAPTER IV  
PERPLEXING PROBLEMS

"My chaise was shot through; but the Lord preserved my person."

"I find the spirit of party among some of the people: the local preachers tell them of the ordinances, and they catch at them like fish at a bait."

"I spoke with my countryman, John Dickins, and found him opposed to our continuance in union with the Episcopal Church; brother Watters and Garretson tried their men, and found them inflexible."

"William M'Kendree and R. H. sent me their resignations in writing. We agreed to let our displeased brethren still preach among us."

—*Asbury's Journal*

"There was reported, on the minutes for 1800, even less members by at least one thousand than for 1792. This decrease of members during this period was only one of the disastrous effects of the secession of Mr. O'Kelley, and of the agitations and difficulties that grew out of the schism."

—LARRABEE, *Asbury and His Coadjutors*

"Moved from the chair, that there be one thousand forms of Discipline prepared for the use of the South Carolina Conference, in which the section and rule on slavery be left out."

LITTLE, in *Journal of the General Conference*

## CHAPTER IV

### PERPLEXING PROBLEMS

HAVING spoken in a general way of the conditions and circumstances which had to do with the rise of the Methodist Church in America, it is proper now for us to consider more in detail some of the problems which made difficult its founding and its early years. The very fact that Asbury and the circuit riders were of a type with the settlers to whom they preached would help to make effective the spiritual enthusiasm of their ministrations, and their method of approach was so direct and searching as to reach the individual conscience of those who came to hear. It must not be assumed, however, that the lack of marked cultural refinement meant a corresponding lack of individuality upon the part of the people, for there was in the mind and character of the American settler a vein of sturdy and sterling originality which made the immediate situation more complicated, but at the same time made the final outcome more hopeful. If they were simple and untutored, they were certainly practical; and being inspired by religious experience rather than by the interest or the passion of the moment, their counsels were constructive.

It has been pointed out that Asbury came to America in the sole interest of saving the people. It was to be

expected, therefore, that his first problem would be to reach the people with his message. In those carefree days, there was no hope of winning the scattered and restless multitudes except by carrying the gospel to the door of the cabin in the wilderness. Embury, Webb, Williams, Boardman, Pilmoor—all of them had failed to visualize the task and were devoting themselves to centers like Philadelphia and New York. They were good men, but they were utterly lacking in the evangelistic aggressiveness necessary for the stupendous work upon which they were engaged. Only the eccentric Strawbridge had dared to startle the wilderness with the message of Christ and the hymns of the Wesleys.

Before he had been in America a month Asbury began to talk about "a circulation of preachers." He adds: "I expect trouble is at hand. This I expected when I left England, and I am willing to suffer, yea, to die, sooner than betray so good a cause by any means." Two days later he says: "My brethren seem unwilling to leave the cities, but I think I shall show them the way."<sup>1</sup> In two days more he is at West Chester, twenty miles in the country, and from that day down to the present the Methodist circuit rider has traveled continuously every road and trail all over this broad land. It does not seem to be too much to claim that no other feature of church polity did so much to carry the message of salvation to every settlement in the whole country as did this itinerant rule of the Methodist ministry, introduced and exemplified by Francis Asbury.

The itinerant requirement worked many and grievous hardships upon the noble and devoted men of

<sup>1</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 17.

pioneer days. Some were forced out of the traveling connection by the self-denial which it imposed, and many a consecrated man went to his death on account of the exposure and the unbearable toil incident to the system. The American people will be perpetual debtors to those knightly heroes for what they contributed and what they made possible to the social life and the national ideal. Asbury was not only the leader in this itinerant ministry, but he was also largely responsible for supplying the losses from the ranks and for finding recruits for the constantly increasing demand.

A chief problem at the beginning was to secure discipline—the regulation of the lives of the people according to the Methodist ideal of Christian living. People who had enjoyed an almost unrestrained independence of action were not to be made over without serious difficulty. The environment of moral looseness which prevailed made regulation necessary, if the Methodist ideal of holy living were to become a practical fact. Many were willing to enjoy its emotional exaltation, but drew back at the suggestion of being restrained in their personal excesses. This brought on many a clash with those in whose hearts the dominion of sin had not been conquered. Many were denied the privileges of fellowship with the Methodists, for the stern Asbury would not retreat. He was in America for a spiritual ideal and not for numbers. One of his biographers says: "His object was not to appear great, but to do good."<sup>2</sup>

Next, and even before Methodist preaching and teaching had been established in the thought and esteem of the people, came the Revolution. Asbury was

<sup>2</sup> Larrabee, *Asbury and His Coadjutors*, p. 202.

much depressed by it and the texts of his sermons at this time betray his anxiety of soul. There was good reason for his uneasiness. It seems that he was not troubled on his own account nor as to the final result, but rather because the war prevented the people from giving themselves to thoughts of God and salvation. In this particular it was a time of great trial for all religious enterprises, for the judicial temper subsides when passion rules. Asbury's situation, however, was worse than the general condition created by war. Thomas Rankin was head of the Methodist Societies, and he gave offense; Martin Rodda joined with the Tories against the American cause; and the entire contingent of English missionaries, except Asbury, left the field. This naturally left the whole cause under a measure of suspicion that had to be lived down by Asbury and by the preachers who undertook to carry on during the dark and disheartening days of the struggle for political independence.

The whole responsibility for the maintenance of the Methodist cause fell upon the shoulders of an unrevealed man, and a man who lacked the friends necessary to quiet the fears of those who looked askance at every representative of the connection. Freeborn Garretson was almost killed, Peddicord was severely beaten, Hartley was whipped, and Forrest and Wren were imprisoned. Asbury himself was fined in Maryland for preaching the gospel, but he refused to surrender the cause, or to become embroiled in a contest the nature of which had little to do with the spread of Scriptural holiness among the people. Throughout the entire struggle he maintained neutrality without betraying in





STATUE OF ASBURY BY AUGUSTUS LUKEMAN, ON CAMPUS OF DREW  
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, MADISON, NEW JERSEY



the slightest degree the interests of the people, politically or otherwise. Before the war closed he went whither he would with absolute freedom, and the membership of the Methodist Societies increased four hundred-fold during the progress of the conflict. Asbury's part in this phenomenal growth is told in a letter to Zachariah Myles, August 16, 1804, in which he says that he was in Delaware twenty months; that he went where he saw fit; that he lodged in the houses of very reputable people; had access to the houses of Governor Rodney, Judge Bassett, and Dr. Magaws; and that he added 1800 members in the State of Delaware.<sup>3</sup>

The next difficulty grew out of the dependence of the Societies upon the ministry of other churches for the administration of the ordinances. The Methodist movement lacked ministers with full ecclesiastical authority and privilege, and it was different in its ideal from the parent church. These things made trouble inevitable. Self-respecting people and men of independent turn of mind would naturally feel the humiliation of such an artificial arrangement; and the uncertain character of many of the American clergy was not calculated to relieve the tension. But the English clergy left the field, and Asbury writes Dr. Joseph Benson: "The Presbyterians held no open communion—the Methodists could not become Presbyterians in sentiment—they would not be Baptists—neither Independents."<sup>4</sup> In an informal conference of the preachers preceding the Deer-Creek Conference of 1777, it was proposed that Rankin should baptize, but this was not

<sup>3</sup> Drew MSS.

<sup>4</sup> Candler School of Theology MSS.

agreed to;<sup>5</sup> and the ordinance question remained one of the acute issues throughout the war.

The grounds for the contest with reference to the ordinances is admirably summed up by Leroy M. Lee in stating the opinion of Jesse Lee. In substance he says that the demand for the ordinances was based upon the perfectly sound principle that the sacraments are the heritage of all Christians, and that the right to them is concurrent with regeneration. Their very importance was such that a good Providence would not consent to their being hedged round by ecclesiastical arrangements which would defeat the intention of their institution. He thinks that it was perfectly natural and just that they should feel that the most important qualification for the administration of such sacred symbols should be a holy life rather than a particular form of ordination, and that the ordinances were means of grace in the hands of a priesthood of holy men and not instruments of ecclesiastical power.<sup>6</sup>

As early as 1773, when Asbury was appointed to Baltimore with Robert Strawbridge as his associate, the ordinance question was an issue. Strawbridge was of the free-lance type and insisted upon administering the sacraments, and all Asbury's efforts to dissuade him were vain. Asbury himself was a staunch adherent to the whole Wesleyan plan and his mind was slow-moving and conservative; but the contest increased in intensity until the whole anomalous situation ended. At one time during the progress of the Revolution the churches of Virginia and Carolina were in

<sup>5</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 243.

<sup>6</sup> Leroy M. Lee, *Life and Times of Jesse Lee*, p. 76; Lee, *History of the Methodists*, p. 96.

revolt, and Philip Gatch and John Dickins were among those who insisted upon having the privileges of the Christian church and the full authority of the Christian ministry. The Southern preachers went so far as to ordain themselves. To Asbury, who went to the next Conference, which met at Manakintown, as an ambassador for peace and union, more than to any other was due the reconciliation effected. But this Methodist Lochinvar knew too well the temper of that Southern group and was too discerning a man to imagine that the contest was ended with his brilliant dash upon Manakintown. He put aside every other call and plunged into a tour of Virginia and North Carolina, that the fears of the people might be relieved. He knew, however, that the impossible situation was doomed, and appealed to Mr. Wesley with an insistence that brought results.<sup>7</sup>

The organized church had as its first great problem the question of episcopal authority and control. There was great wisdom in the restrained action of the Christmas Conference, which undertook nothing more than the organization of the church and the institution of its ministry. It was clearly no time for making hard and fast regulations of any kind; there had been practically no time for thought and preparation upon the part of anyone for this amazing step. Asbury himself was surprised by what was proposed, and all the other American preachers must have been no less so. The whole scheme was so strange to both Methodist experience and to ecclesiastical tradition as to make a cautious course advisable.

The decision which left so many things undeter-

<sup>7</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 399.

mined, wise as it was, made way for trouble and complications. It offered a challenge to independent minds and an opportunity for men who might have personal aspirations to gratify. As early as 1790 we find James O'Kelly writing Bishop Asbury and making complaint of his misuse of episcopal power. He went so far even as to threaten the Bishop with open opposition if he did not desist from the alleged misuse of power.<sup>8</sup> The feeling of O'Kelly became so pronounced in this matter that he carried it to the General Conference of 1792, in an effort to secure the right of appeal to the Conference when a preacher should feel himself injured by the appointment given him. Jesse Lee says: "This motion brought on a long debate, the arguments for and against the proposal were weighty, and handled in a masterly manner. There had never been a subject before us that so fully called forth all the strength of the preachers." He then goes on to say that the debate on the "appeal" lasted for two or three days, and that the motion was lost by a large majority.<sup>9</sup> The debate became so heated that Bishop Asbury withdrew from the Conference room. He wrote the Conference a letter in which he defended himself against having done intentional wrong to any preacher, and warned the body against hasty and ill-considered action.<sup>10</sup>

In the year following the General Conference of 1792, William Moss writes Bishop Asbury a letter under date of May 7, which among other things contains the following quotation from a Petersburg paper: ". . . local preachers and people of the Methodist

<sup>8</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. II, p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> Lee, *History of the Methodists*, pp. 178, 179.

<sup>10</sup> Strickland, *The Pioneer Bishop*, p. 268.



Church in Mecklenburg ct. are generally opposed to the arbitrary measures adopted by the Bishop and his adherents, and as there appears to be no prospect of his ever retracing from those despotic principles of church government, which he has so long labored to establish, . . . it is proposed that the Local preachers (or lay members delegated for the purpose by the societies with whom they are connected) do meet at Reese's Chapel next, in order to unite in a formal protest against prelatical government, and for a constitution wholly on republican principles as it is thought such a one will be more productive of peace and harmony in the church.<sup>11</sup> This article indicates clearly the feeling that existed and the nature of the struggle for the maintenance of episcopal authority and control.

The occasion for an organized attack upon episcopal authority was found in the Council. This body appears to have been the result of a plan of Bishop Asbury for meeting the demands of the rapidly expanding church without the inconvenience, waste of time, and expense of having all the preachers come together for a General Conference; and it is not unlikely that he sought in this way to obviate the peril to the whole Methodist system involved in the unlimited authority of the Conference. The Council was composed of the bishops and the presiding elders, and undertook rather wide jurisdiction in the regulation of the church and in the initiation of new laws and movements. It does not seem to have been well thought out, for any new regulation must begin with the unanimous consent of the Council and was not to

<sup>11</sup> Drew MSS.



be binding until agreed to by a majority of the Conference held for any district. The purpose was good, both as respects the end to be achieved and the composition of the Council; but it was just as certainly true that the plan held the possibility of a dangerous centralization of power in the hands of the episcopacy. The preachers were quick to observe this, and through a determined opposition led by Jesse Lee and James O'Kelly the Council was abandoned without ever being acted upon by the General Conference.

The defeat of the Council led to further attacks upon episcopal prerogative, in the nature of repeated efforts to make the presiding eldership elective. The battle was waged with varying fortune for the next thirty years, since which time little has been done in the way of effort to change the appointive plan. It is not at all necessary to hold that the Methodist plan of episcopal supervision is perfect or that it is not sometimes abused; its sufficient defense is in the part which it has contributed to the effectiveness of the church organization through the more than a hundred years of its existence. It is not altogether improbable that fewer abuses have occurred under the present plan of making presiding elders than might have been the case if the selection had been open to the politics and the self-seeking of a more democratic arrangement.

The most serious outcome of the attack upon the episcopacy was the defection of James O'Kelly, who carried with him a number of preachers, among them Rice Haggard and William M'Kendree. Asbury was able to win back M'Kendree, but most of the others did not return. Dr. George G. Smith thinks that there was no evidence of "censurable motive" in the con-

duct of O'Kelly.<sup>12</sup> This may be true, but he was certainly a bad loser, and the schism which he brought about took a tremendous toll from the membership of the church. In 1800 the membership showed a net loss of more than a thousand from the figures of 1792.<sup>13</sup> Jesse Lee says that many of the dissatisfied members fell into contentions, "till they were turned back to the world, and gave up religion altogether."<sup>14</sup> These were troublous times for Bishop Asbury, but the sincerity of his motive and the transparency of his life did much to maintain confidence in the office which he held. The whole unhappy chapter connected with James O'Kelly goes to show that any convinced and determined man in a position of great power is a tyrant to the man whom he must oppose.

Another vexatious problem which agitated the church from the beginning was slavery. Bishop Asbury's personal attitude toward the institution was that of utter repudiation, on the ground that it was both inhuman and unscriptural. He abhorred it with all his soul. He solicited the influence of General Washington against it, made a personal appeal to the Governor of North Carolina, and prepared a petition to be presented to the legislature of Virginia, in efforts to bring about emancipation. Under his leadership the church undertook to crush the institution among its preachers and people; but it soon became apparent that such a design was not to be accomplished by processes of church discipline. The country had not reached the

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Francis Asbury*, p. 147.

<sup>13</sup> *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, 1773 to 1813*, pp. 118, 243.

<sup>14</sup> Lee, *History of the Methodists*, p. 205.

stage of thinking to which emancipation belonged. The rule against slavery was enforced against the ministry for a time, as appears from the fact that Bishop Asbury refused ordination to Philip W. Taylor, of the Kentucky Conference, on account of his connection with slavery.<sup>15</sup> But every such instance of discipline revealed more and more the insufficiency of the church to cope with slavery, unless it might have the support of political sanction as well.

But, opposed to slavery as he was, Asbury was far too wise a leader to waste the opportunities of his own ministry, and to hazard the effectiveness of the ministry of the church which he represented by a policy that was doomed to failure from the start. He quickly sensed the difficulty involved and in his leadership sought to conserve and promote the union of all factions and interests as the only means of bringing about an adjustment of the unhappy situation that confronted the American people. Asbury's hope was that the two sides to the controversy might be kept together, and that God would so lead the minds and hearts of the people as to bring emancipation to pass. In the General Conference of 1800, every move to force the emancipation of slaves was negated. The conciliatory attitude of the Conference may be seen from its ordering an educative address as to the "evils of the spirit and practice of slavery," and the instruction to the Annual Conferences to attempt to secure action by state legislatures for "gradual abolition of slavery."<sup>16</sup> In 1804 Asbury refused to act under the motion "That the subject of slavery be left to the three bishops, to form a section

<sup>15</sup> Redford, *Methodism in Kentucky*, p. 282.

<sup>16</sup> *Journal of the General Conference* (1800), p. 41.

to suit the southern and northern states, as they in their wisdom may think best, to be submitted to the Conference.”<sup>17</sup> In 1808 the journal of the General Conference read: “Moved from the chair, that there be one thousand forms of Discipline prepared for the use of the South Carolina Conference, in which the section and rule on slavery be left out.”<sup>18</sup> This appears in the proceedings of May 26, and as M’Kendree had been ordained just eight days preceding it is hardly to be believed that the mover was other than Bishop Asbury. In 1809 we have from Asbury’s Journal: “Would not an *amelioration* in the condition and treatment of slaves have produced more practical good to the poor Africans, than any attempt at their emancipation?”<sup>19</sup> This he said in view of the fact that the way was hedged up by the “state of society.” The question of slavery was introduced here to show its contribution to the problem of the church and of the ministry of Bishop Asbury, and will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Enough has been said to show that the contests of Asbury’s day were such as to reveal the ability of any man who had to face them, and to discover the weaknesses of a leadership that might be uncertain of itself. But despite the difficult situation out of which the Methodist Church originated, and despite the many grave problems with which it had to deal in the period of its building, it came through as the most vigorous, virile, and commanding ecclesiasticism of that day. The organization had its weaknesses; but it had a lead-

<sup>17</sup> *Journal of the General Conference* (1804), p. 60.

<sup>18</sup> *Journal of the General Conference* (1808), p. 93.

<sup>19</sup> Asbury’s Journal, Vol. III, p. 298.

ership and a purpose among its members which made it mighty in the moral and spiritual life of the nation. There can be no doubt that it was Francis Asbury who steered the Methodist Church through the rough waters of the early days. He may have made mistakes, but he did not surrender before any problem that developed.

CHAPTER V  
INTEREST IN SOCIAL QUESTIONS

"We dined in the woods, and stopped at Esquire Leech's; brandy and the Bible were both handed me: one was enough—I took but one."

"I was going to administer the sacrament, and discovered that what they had provided for wine was in reality brandy; so I desisted."

"What absurdities will not men defend! If the Gospel will tolerate slavery, what will it not authorize?"

—*Asbury's Journal*

"From the Apostle Paul to General Booth, the forces of social reform have ever been kindled by meditation upon the glories and realities of the unseen world."

—JAMES TODD, quoted in *Christian World Pulpit*

"Lodged under the roof of Nancy Willis. There are many late converts around her: Frank Hollingsworth and his wife, Henry Willis and a young lady with fifty thousand dollars—can she get and keep religion? I doubt."

"Marriage is honourable in all—but to me it is a ceremony awful as death. Well may it be so, when I calculate we have lost the travelling labours of two hundred of the best men in America or the world, by marriage and consequent location."

—*Asbury's Journal*



## CHAPTER V

### INTEREST IN SOCIAL QUESTIONS

WHEN Francis Asbury declared himself to be "a man of another world" he gave the key to the dominant idea of his life, for in all that he did he was ruled by the most intense spiritual purpose. But the spiritual ideal has to do with men and cannot be separated from anything that influences conduct. His efforts to minister to the religious needs of the people were necessarily tremendously influenced by geography, social conditions, and the political thinking of the day. His constant travel gave him positive interest in all matters of public improvement, such as roads, bridges, ferries, boats, and even the housing of the people. Indeed, there was no matter connected with the public welfare which did not enter into his problem of teaching and guidance.

Every question which affects the thinking and the character of the citizen is, at the same time, rooted in the fundamental teachings of the gospel; and every cause which contributes to unworthy living is a problem of religious leadership as much as it is a problem of the State. Hence, Asbury could not ignore the personal and social vices of the people without destroying the appeal of the gospel which he preached. Gambling,

swearing, dishonesty, drink, and other vices created the difficult problem of discipline, which came to be a very necessary part of Methodist evangelism.

Through all these incidental and collateral phases of his ministry Asbury walked with a dignity of soul not less than that with which he faced the distinctly spiritual conditions out of which they were developed. He had the rare gift of being able to keep the primary and the incidental in proper relation, and so at no time did he lose the supreme emphasis of his ministry. He did not surrender the conviction that sin was the constitutional malady, even though he dealt with each separate evil as a symptom of the one thing that he was set to cure. His extraordinary poise kept him from narrowing his ministry to any specific problem, but he dealt with the social question as a very real part of the work that he had to do.

The social question which Asbury met upon the very threshold of America was African slavery. It is likely that no other question moved his spirit to such depths as did slavery. He hated slavery with an inveterate hatred. He had a profound conviction that it was unchristian and grossly wicked to take away human liberty, particularly since it seemed to him to defeat in both the slave and his master the higher implications of the Word of God. From the very first his interest and sympathy were enlisted on the side of the slaves. He says: "I went to I. Worthington's; but I beheld such cruelty to a negro that I could not feel free to stay; I called for my horse, delivered my own soul, and departed."<sup>1</sup> "I pity the poor slaves. O that God would look down in mercy, and take their

<sup>1</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 460.

cause in hand!"<sup>2</sup> His satisfaction in a celibate ministry was increased by the fact that "we are saved from the pollution of negro slavery and oppression."<sup>3</sup> There was never any doubt as to his personal feeling concerning slavery, but in his antagonism to the institution there were certain facts which he must face justly and judiciously.

It is hardly probable that he had a distinct idea of the volcanic fire that slumbered in the heart of slavery, but he had pronounced conviction that it was wrong and that God would set the social order to rights. Notwithstanding his outspoken and pronounced attitude, he could not escape the fact that it was an institution which the people immediately concerned had not originated. It was an establishment of the colonizing nations and represented a practice as old as history. He could not be just and ignore that fact, and in his efforts to deal with the institution he had to reckon with the feelings and understandings of the people. His opposition to slavery was rooted in the very depths of his soul, but he did not fail to perceive the bigness of the problem of emancipation. His earliest experiences with it taught him that he could not brush aside the interests and the opinions of those who favored it without disrupting the work that brought him to America.

On one occasion he undertook to discuss slave-keeping with some friends and immediately raised a furor. He found solace for his disappointment in the assurance that God would plead the cause of the oppressed, and records the prayer: "O Lord, banish the infernal

<sup>2</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 482.

<sup>3</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 298.

spirit of slavery from thy dear Zion." <sup>4</sup> He said of the Address of the General Conference of 1800: "Nothing could so effectually alarm and arm the citizens of South Carolina against the Methodists"; <sup>5</sup> and again and again he meets conditions and encounters opinions which reveal the stubbornness of the task confronting him.

In the first Discipline of the Methodist Church, slavery comes in for a share of the attention of those who are undertaking to fix the course of the new church. The suggestion of a gradual emancipation of the slaves is among the first pronouncements of Methodism; but the tenseness of the situation then is indicated by its being carefully guarded: "N.B. These Rules are to affect the members of our societies no further than as they are consistent with the laws of the States in which they reside." <sup>6</sup> This exception in the Discipline does not mean that Asbury was less opposed to slavery than he had been at the first, but it was in the nature of a common denominator of the opinions of those composing the church.

Slavery was such a distinct and organic part of the life of the people as to carry Asbury farther toward a distinctly political effort than any other matter to which he gave his attention. He commended the Quakers for their activities in behalf of the slaves, and expressed the belief that the Methodists must come to the same laudable position or forfeit their spiritual crown. He used what influence he had to bring about emancipation in an orderly and righteous way. There

<sup>4</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 374.

<sup>5</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Book of Discipline, 1784, p. 17.

is no record that he ever went beyond efforts that were entirely consistent with law and with the larger interests to be served through the church; but he lost no opportunity and spared no effort to deal it a mortal blow.

Asbury had no interest in politics as such. He deprecated every association of the kind. Some of the preachers in Pennsylvania displayed warm political partisanship and he promptly condemned it as being wrong, regardless of the side that they might take.<sup>7</sup> On one occasion when the Baptists of Connecticut sought his assistance in securing the passage of a toleration act he almost exploded with resentment. "We are neither popes nor politicians,"<sup>8</sup> he replied. His appeal was not to earthly courts and his hope was not in the manipulation of legislatures. His hope was in the God, who "putteth down one, and setteth up another."

Another social problem which forced itself upon the attention of Asbury was the widespread and ruinous habit of drink. It was such a common vice among the people that whiskey was frequently offered to Asbury, but it was as often and instantly refused. He found it such a menace to morals and such a hindrance to religion that he counseled the people to keep whiskey bottles out of their cabins and away from their premises. One day he came into the beautiful Wyoming region of Pennsylvania, and here found a decent and thrifty German people. But they had the habit of drink, which, he declares, "is the prime curse of the United States, and will be, I much fear, the ruin

<sup>7</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 303.

<sup>8</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 115.

of all that is excellent in morals and government in them.”<sup>9</sup>

It is probably true that no evil with which he had to do interfered more with discipline and with worship itself than whiskey. He says that on one occasion some wagoners undertook to sell whiskey on the camp ground where he was preaching, but he stopped speaking until the people drove them away. Many nights which he spent at public taverns were made hideous by the wretched carousing and disorderly conduct of men who were drinking. Drink was then, as it is to-day, too much related to personal and social morality to be passed over without stern rebuke; and Francis Asbury was not the man to show softness to such a devastating and soul-wrecking evil as he knew whiskey to be. On one occasion brandy instead of wine was provided for the communion service, but as soon as he discovered it he stopped the service. He was resolved to make no compromise with the evil that was striking at the moral foundations of the life of the nation. In this stern and uncompromising fashion he led the people of the New Republic in temperance sentiment and ideals which came to fruition in the nationwide outlawing of the drink evil. And in all that shall be accomplished in this cause, Asbury will be a legitimate sharer in the glory.

Asbury's attitude on the subject of marriage seems, on the surface view, to have been a decided eccentricity. He was a bachelor, and his remarks on the subject often indicate hostility to the institution of marriage. Once in Rockingham, North Carolina, he records with some appearance of impatience: "Here the people would have

<sup>9</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 391.



assembled, but there was a wedding afoot; this is a matter of moment, as some men have but one during life, and some find that one to have been one too many.”<sup>10</sup> In 1774 he wrote to William Duke: “Stand at all possible distance from the female sex, that you be not betrayed by them that will damage the young mind and sink the aspiring soul and blast the prospects of the future man. I leave you to your Master, and be sure to keep close to your faithful guide.”<sup>11</sup> Henry Boehm says that he performed many marriage ceremonies, but he records less than a dozen in the course of his thirty years as an ordained minister, and those he mentions usually in connection with other matters.

In his own case we have no explanation, until the later years of his life, of why he remained single. In 1804 he records that it came about through his earnest desire to serve God in the salvation of souls, and that the duties and privations imposed by his ministry became so great that to enter into matrimonial relations would be “neither just nor generous.”<sup>12</sup> He is reported to have written his mother a letter referring to an incident happening in England, which seemed to suggest that she had been instrumental in breaking off an early attachment; but just what he meant by this reference will probably never be known. He appears to have had a little sensitiveness regarding his bachelorhood, as, for instance, in his remarks upon Adam Clarke’s comment on the institution of marriage as recorded in Genesis: “I read Adam Clarke, and am amused as well as instructed. He indirectly unchris-

<sup>10</sup> Asbury’s Journal, Vol. III, p. 213.

<sup>11</sup> Drew MSS.

<sup>12</sup> Asbury’s Journal, Vol. III, p. 143.



tianizes all old bachelors. Woe is me! It was not good that Adam should be alone for better reasons than any that Adam Clarke has given. How will our commentator comment on Isaiah lvi. 3-5, on 1 Corinthians vii. 7, 8, 27, 32, 34? and will he not need great skill to manage for his purpose Matthew xix. 12?"<sup>13</sup>

The chief reason for his opposition to matrimony was probably based upon the troubles caused him by the marriage of his ministers. It is said that from the first General Conference in 1792 to the General Conference of 1800, two hundred and twenty-one preachers located, the greater number of them either to marry or on account of their families. Asbury explains his feeling in the matter when he says: "I calculate we have lost the travelling labours of two hundred of the best men in America, or the world, by marriage and consequent location."<sup>14</sup> The records show that of the preachers received in Asbury's time practically half of them were lost by location. It is no wonder, therefore, that he records with apparent satisfaction the fact that the Virginia Conference in 1809 had eighty-four preachers, only three of whom were married;<sup>15</sup> and we should not be surprised if he had some feeling on account of the increase of his difficulties by the continual influx of a band of raw recruits to take the place of those who had surrendered to home-making.

Added to the troubles occasioned by locations were still other difficulties which tended to embarrass the work of Bishop Asbury. In Massachusetts he says: "Our preachers get wives and a home, and run to their *dears* almost every night: how can they by personal

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 365.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 297.

observation, know the state of the families it is part of their duty to watch over for good?" <sup>16</sup> In the year before his death he says of the New York Conference: "Alas! what miseries and distresses are here. How shall we meet the charge of seventy married out of ninety-five preachers—children—sick wives—and the claims of conference?" <sup>17</sup> It would seem to be practically certain that the determining factor in his attitude toward marriage was the embarrassment which it occasioned him in the work which was his daily life and the joy of his soul.

Asbury's feelings seem to have softened somewhat as he came to realize that the marriage of his ministers was one thing that he could not hope to control. On one occasion he records: "Jonathan Jackson is married: O thou pattern of celibacy, art thou caught! Who can resist? Our married man was forty years of age: he has taken to wife a Mrs. Roberts—a poor, pious widow." <sup>18</sup> At the session of the Virginia Conference in 1804: "When a certain brother's case came before the Conference for admission on trial, one of the preachers said, 'But he is married.' Asbury replied, 'What of that? perhaps he is better for it. Better take preachers well married, than be at the trouble of marrying them after you get them.'" <sup>19</sup> It does not seem altogether improbable that, after a century and a quarter, that position might still be regarded as sound.

The great variety of matters to which Asbury gave attention shows the keenness of his interest in whatever affected the moral and social welfare of the people. The sweep of his social concern shows not alone the

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 339.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 452.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>19</sup> Bennett, *Memorials of Methodism in Virginia*, p. 471.

greatness of his own soul, but his ability as a moral leader and a civic builder as well. It requires no unusual gift of imagination to surmise what would have been his attitude to the evils which confront us had he lived to our day. No advocate of a super-navy would expect comfort from the man who suffered so much on account of war. No politician would tarry long to argue with him the question of "States' rights" in connection with election debaucheries for reëstablishing the "prime curse" of civilization. Neither the bootlegger nor his polite and polished patron would dare to seek solace of him under the specious phrases which garnish appeals for "personal liberty." The wildest fanatic on the subject of "companionate marriage" would not be so simple and unsophisticated as to try a pass with the man to whom marriage was "a ceremony awful as death." The withering denunciations which would have rushed from his outraged soul would have left no doubt as to his condemnation of our national political scandal. And, certainly, the man whose soul burned with righteous indignation at the cruel injustices of African slavery would never look with indifference upon the barbarities of twentieth-century lynchings, nor would he condone even by his silence the wretched economic abuses which permit the African to be defrauded of the just rewards of his toil.

The one thing that stands out in all Asbury's interest in social questions is the fact that they were never more than incidental to the spiritual enterprise to which he had given his whole heart. He interested himself in social questions because they had real connection with his work, and followed them only so far as his primary interest made it necessary to do so. In this way he

retained the religious emphasis as supreme, he changed in none of his activities, and he lost none of the fervor of his heart. He led a movement that began without popular prestige, and his great authority in the church and over the ministry made him the target for the wrath of every disappointed and defeated man; yet he never lost his faith in the ultimate triumph of the gospel he had preached and of the church he had organized and directed.



CHAPTER VI  
INTEREST IN EDUCATION

"I wished only for schools—Doctor Coke wanted a college."

"I went from house to house through the snow and cold, begging money for the support of the poor orphans at Cokesbury."

—*Asbury's Journal*

"We shall take care that our books be not only inoffensive but useful; that they contain as much strong *sense*, and as much *genuine morality* as possible."

—BANGS, *History of the M. E. Church*

"I was in company with Br. W. and Br. S. on *Wednesday*, but was much distressed on account of so few preachers well qualified for the work, and so many who were forward to preach without due qualification."

. . . . .

"Brother Dickins drew the subscription for a Kingswood school in America; this was what came out a college in the subscription printed by Dr. Coke. Gabriel Long and Brother Bustion were the first subscribers, which I hope will be for the glory of God and good of thousands."

"I was led to enlarge on the obligations of parents to their children; and the nature of that religious education which would be most likely to fit them for this, and which alone could qualify them for the next world."

—*Asbury's Journal*



## CHAPTER VI

### INTEREST IN EDUCATION

THE educational interest of Francis Asbury is one of the least understood sides of his career. Opinion in this matter must be based largely upon sentiments which he expressed and enterprises in which he failed, and neither source offers much direct proof as to his position. His words are few and unsatisfactory, and they are often petulant, pessimistic, and provincial. On account of this Dr. Bangs thinks that his indifference to education, especially in the ministry, is an administrative error to be excused only because of the many virtues that adorned his life.<sup>1</sup> His educational ideal is probably not to be gathered from what he said, nor should his devotion to education be measured by what he actually achieved in the founding of permanent educational institutions. He said many things which do not express his own mental elevation; and his failure to establish permanent educational landmarks is a commentary upon the times rather than upon Asbury's ideals and interests.

To begin with, it was an educational sowing time. Mr. Wesley arranged a ritualistic service for America, but the people were so little qualified for its use that it had to be abandoned for a form which was simpler and

<sup>1</sup> Bangs, *History of the M. E. Church*, Vol. II, p. 413.

better adapted to the understanding of the pioneer settler. It would be too much to expect that a people with such cultural limitations would be inclined to fall in with an educational movement and give it the support that would be necessary for its success. Any great effort toward developing educational interest would have to wait until the competitive factors of life should bring the people face to face with the value of such training. That hour did not come in Asbury's day.

Outside of New England there was a noticeable lack of appreciation of education which in the frontier settlements gradually shaded off into utter indifference, a general condition which had been handed down from generation to generation. To illustrate, Governor Berkeley, of Virginia, is quoted as saying in 1661: "I thank God we have no free schools nor printing, and I hope we shall not have these hundred years; for learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing has divulged them and libels against the government."<sup>2</sup> Twenty years after Asbury was dead, Hon. Henry A. Wise, at that time a representative in Congress and afterward governor of Virginia, found occasion to thank God that there were neither schools nor newspapers in the Accomac District.<sup>3</sup> What was true at that time in the Accomac District in Virginia was even more true of a large part of the field covered by Asbury. Such a sentiment from an outstanding political leader shows that the foundation for educational enterprises had to be laid in the thinking of the whole people.

To say that Asbury was indifferent to education

<sup>2</sup> Hudson, *Journalism in the United States*, p. 119.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

My Dear beloved in the Lord and also parents Dear October 26.  
being moved from the place i was in i think it my Duty to let you  
know and I hope you will not repine or be unease I am now in  
health and strength and very well contented Settled upon my  
behaviour in Wiltshire there is a preacher of us in the Rounne  
have many places and in General a Loving good natured people  
So see nothing to Complain of there is no want of anything for our  
bread and water is sure on ley there is a great want in need of  
vision and <sup>grace</sup> for the work but I hope my god will Supply  
all my wants me Spend our Sundays at northmouth and holding  
the same time to Large Congregations and very Large and good  
houses I had no choice this year and now i think i am as well  
Settled as i could Desire as to temporals that is the least of  
my care of my heart is the Right I shall not want them  
sometimes I hope My dear Mother You are more easy now  
will you inform in such a manner If you have given Me  
a letter let it be a private offering and to be kept for me  
I am sure to be happy with such a good offering from  
the

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#### PART OF A LETTER FROM ASBURY TO HIS PARENTS IN 1768

This letter was written from his circuit, Wiltshire, England, and shows his educational limitations when he came to America.



would be to contradict the facts of his own development. At the beginning of this chapter is a plate which shows the educational limitations which he had to overcome in his own ministry. He was not an educated man in the sense of possessing college training and culture; but in the practical meaning of education he might very well be so regarded. He certainly understood the value of education, and very few men ever did more to overcome deficiencies in that respect than he did. His Journal shows an amazing range of study, covering practically the whole field of literature and scientific investigation of that day. History, biography, science, theology, sermonic literature, and physics are included in his list; and his observations show that he was not just a casual reader. He toiled over Hebrew and Greek until he acquired a working knowledge of both languages, and he turned his knowledge to account in the interpretation of difficult passages of Scripture.<sup>4</sup> With such a background of study and development, it is unreasonable to claim that he had no interest in education.

Dr. Bangs' interpretation does not take into account the meaning of Asbury's ventures in the founding of schools. Surely these must have some bearing upon the interpretation of his educational interest. He was, as we know, a prime mover in the establishment of Cokesbury College, and the burden of its maintenance fell almost altogether upon his shoulders. He founded Cokesbury school in North Carolina; Ebenezer Academy, Virginia; Bethel, Kentucky; Bethel, South Carolina; Union, Pennsylvania; and Wesley and Whitefield school in Georgia. They all failed, and it

<sup>4</sup> Bangs, *History of the M. E. Church*, Vol. II, p. 415.

is probable that Asbury felt that the time had not come for such effort. But in 1815, the very year preceding Asbury's death, Allegheney College was founded. It suspended operations for a short time, but resumed and has continued until this day. Cokesbury College failed, but not until it had given Valentine Cook to the church. Asbury was discouraged—and who wouldn't have been?—but through his persistent efforts he helped to bring on the dawn of a better day in the educational development of America.

There were times when he gave expression to thoughts that seemed to discredit learning, but at other times he was equally definite and outspoken in his advocacy of education. In his *Journal* he says of Ira Ellis: "I have often thought that had fortune given him the same advantages of education, he would have displayed abilities not inferior to a Jefferson or a Madison."<sup>5</sup> In a letter to William Duke, dated March 4, 1774, he admonishes him: "Take every opportunity for getting knowledge, and always consider yourself as ignorant and as having everything to learn."<sup>6</sup> William Duke was admitted on trial at the Conference that year, and for that reason this advice is an important sidelight upon the interest of Asbury in education.

There is still another statement which is more to the point than the advice which he gave his young ministerial friend. In the "Notes on the Discipline" of 1796 we have this passage: "The proper education of children is of exceeding great moment to the welfare of mankind. About one-half of the human race are under the age of sixteen, and may be considered, the

<sup>5</sup> Asbury's *Journal*, Vol. III, p. 182.

<sup>6</sup> Drew MSS.

infants excepted, as capable of instruction. The welfare of states and countries in which we live, and what is infinitely more, the salvation of their souls, do, under the grace and providence of God, depend in a considerable degree upon their education.”<sup>7</sup> The “Notes on the Discipline” were written by Coke and Asbury together, and more than once in his Journal we find reference to Asbury’s part in the compilation. Cokesbury had been burned a year before and many of the schools had failed, but Asbury’s devotion to education was unchanged by the disaster which befell his enterprises.

One thing needs to be kept in mind: in his educational purpose and ideal Asbury was no less an evangelist than he was in the pulpit. This may be seen in the outline of purpose and plan for Cokesbury College.<sup>8</sup> On November 13, 1795, he wrote Nelson Reed: “I want you to be particularly cautioned against corrupt Latin authors being taught in the College, it is that causeth infidelity, and filleth the minds of youth with infidelity, and lust. And it is strange the poets have not been purified or banished from the schools.”<sup>9</sup> So, also, he repudiated such a conception of education in the ministry as would make it a substitute for spiritual power and evangelistic passion.

One phase of the difficulty which confronted the pioneer Methodists was the lack of educational training among the ministers. John Dickins was an Eton scholar, Pilmoor was trained in Kingswood school, and Robert Williams had similar schooling; but the

<sup>7</sup> Notes on the Discipline, 1796 (Tenth Edition), p. 104.

<sup>8</sup> Bangs, *History of the M. E. Church*, Vol. I, pp. 230-240.

<sup>9</sup> Drew MSS.



others had little or no education. Asbury complains that they were not only deficient in education, but that they were satisfied to go on in the ministry without making an effort to improve themselves. These preachers were the leaders of the people, and little could be expected of a leadership that was not disturbed on account of its own lack of qualification for effective work.

It cannot be denied that Asbury sometimes expressed himself in a way that did not really represent his thought. He was not perfect, his health was poor, and his provocations were many. He never liked New England, for to him it was socially and religiously inhospitable. It is no surprising thing, therefore, that he should have said: "O, New Haven, thou seat of science, and of sin";<sup>10</sup> and of Middleburg, Connecticut: "Here we have college-craft, and priest-craft."<sup>11</sup> On one occasion he says: "Every candid inquirer after truth will acknowledge upon reading church history that it was a great and serious evil, introduced when philosophy and human learning were taught as a preparation for a Gospel ministry."<sup>12</sup> In this expression he was under the spell of Haweis' treatment of the simplicity and directness of the apostolic church; and he was particularly susceptible, since Haweis confirmed his own ideas of the episcopacy. He comments upon Thatcher's answer to Taggart's book: "It is said that there is a special call for learned men to the ministry; some may think so, but I presume a simple man can speak and write for simple, plain people, upon simple, plain truths."<sup>13</sup> In this he is almost certainly speak-

<sup>10</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 155.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 366.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

ing out of his own practical problem and in no sense generalizing as to the value of education for the ministry.

In the plan projecting Cokesbury College there is manifest a breadth of view that would do credit to the ideals of a greater day in educational history. The definition of purpose lifts it clear out of the category of selfish offerings and presents it as a great benevolence, lifting the weight from the shoulders of the man who preaches the Gospel while it develops the powers of the man who is to stand in his place at the end of the day. It was to be an asylum for the orphan and a religious haven for the children of the preachers and Methodist friends.<sup>14</sup> It was to be at once a school of the prophets, an orphans' home, and a thoroughgoing educational institution. We may feel that such was not an ideal arrangement; but it was an arrangement made necessary by the conditions of that day, and Asbury was seeking to meet conditions as they were.

In 1780, at the very moment that Cornwallis and the British army were pressing up from Charleston and pushing back the American armies, John Dickins and Francis Asbury were at Fish River in North Carolina planning a school and securing subscriptions from Gabriel Long and a Mr. Bustion.<sup>15</sup> This was more than four years before Dr. Coke came to America, and goes to show that the educational initiative of the American Methodists belongs to Asbury. The fact that a college was founded the very year preceding his death shows that the years following the failure of Cokesbury and the district schools were not years of

<sup>14</sup> Bangs, *History of the M. E. Church*, Vol. I, pp. 231ff.

<sup>15</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 377.

abandonment, but years in which the educational leaven was working in the minds and hearts of the people whom Asbury led so long.

America was an undeveloped land, the Methodists were poor, and they had no atmosphere of educational culture to inspire them; but their educational activities in America compare very favorably with those of the Methodists across the sea. Within a quarter of a century after Asbury's death a great number of schools and colleges were established. The pioneer had gone to his reward, but he left the reapers behind.

Francis Asbury was always a direct and practical man. There can be no doubt that he sought a ministry suited to the people whom they must serve; but he was too great a general to desire less than an active and constructive leadership for his preachers. He opposed the marriage of his ministers because it interfered with their effectiveness. The extensive organization of schools is a proof of his interest in the education of the people. He had no theories of education and spent no time studying the psychology of the educational process. He was a pioneer in the whole field, and as such he was driving a straight course for a practical end. He had an ideal which he must try out in practice, using the people for a clinic. He made mistakes, and he sometimes lost heart; but he laid a foundation for an educational development among the Methodists which reflects great credit upon his rugged simplicity and sterling worth.

CHAPTER VII  
HUMAN QUALITIES

(Of New Englanders) "Never have I seen any people who could talk so long, so correctly, and so seriously about trifles."

"We stopped at a poor house; nevertheless, they were rich enough to sell us a half bushel of oats, and had sense enough to make us pay well for them."

"My conscience smote me severely for speaking an idle word in company. O! how frail is man. It is very difficult for me to check my rapid flow of spirits when in company with my friends."

"On Wednesday I found my mind somewhat engaged; but on Thursday had some fears of coming short of eternal life. A cloud rested on my mind, which was occasioned by talking and jesting."

—*Asbury's Journal*

(At Col. Putnam's, son of Israel Putnam) "In the evening six or eight gentlemen, Revolutionary officers, with their ladies, were invited in, and we spent a most agreeable evening. The conversation was very entertaining and instructing, and the bishop took an active part in it."

—BOEHM, *Reminiscences*

"He (Asbury) was almost as ascetic as a monk in his life, as stern as a Puritan, regarding as sinful the mirth and merriment which seem to have been part of his nature, and which would bubble out at times."

—*The Nation*

## CHAPTER VII

### HUMAN QUALITIES

FRANCIS ASBURY had a great distrust of personal popularity and an equally marked distaste for personal publicity. He sensed the devil in every good opinion of his ministry, particularly the good opinion which happened to be spoken to his face. He writes: "Some of my friends were so unguarded and imprudent as to commend me to my face. Satan, ready for every advantage, seized the opportunity and assaulted me with self-pleasing, self-exalting ideas. But the Lord enabled me to discover the danger, and the snare was broken."<sup>1</sup> Of another incident he says: "A certain person passed great encomiums, and sounded my praise as a preacher to my face. But this is a dangerous practice; for it is easier for a preacher to think too much of his gifts, than too little. St. Paul, describing the true Israelite, saith: 'whose praise is not of men, but of God.'"<sup>2</sup> Many such instances might be cited to show that he had a mortal fear of human conceit and vanity.

The man who feared to know the good opinion of his friend was equally suspicious of the camera. He had been in America for twenty-three years and had been a bishop for ten years before he consented to have a portrait made. Then his friend James McCannon, of

<sup>1</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol I, p. III.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

Baltimore, persuaded him to have it done, upon the condition that McCannon would make each of his preachers a velvet vest. His fear of vanity succumbed to a philanthropy so near to his heart. He had a portrait painted for his mother in 1797. In 1808 he yielded again when the General Conference insisted that he have a portrait made as a matter of right and justice to the Methodist people. Probably his last portrait was painted by an unknown artist in Strasburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1813. The fact that he never willingly consented that a portrait of himself be made shows how morbidly averse he was to allowing the human and the sentimental too large a place in what he undertook to do. It may seem that he carried this feeling too far in many instances, and he may have made difficulties for himself in doing so; but the fact that he achieved wonderful success in keeping his body under, while he did the work of nation-wide evangelism, is sufficient apology for his method.

Asbury was not more unwilling to hear good opinions of himself or to have his portrait painted than he was to give rein to the natural emotions and feelings which were a part of his being. His action was consistently restrained and his emotions were schooled from childhood. For that reason he is a puzzle to anyone who would undertake to discover the human traits of his character through what he did and said. There are many incidents in the story of his life which, if they could be personally observed, would probably furnish a positive clue; but when they are given out under the soul-censorship of the man who determined to suppress everything which did not contribute directly and positively to his idea of piety and holiness, the case is vastly



different. It is no easy task to trace human quality in restrained action, and no better illustration of this fact can be found than that furnished in the life of Francis Asbury.

One almost feels that his very childhood was made unnatural, if not artificial, by the seriousness of temperament which he says was his. At least his conduct must have been robbed of a large measure of the spontaneity which belongs to the life of a normal boy. As he grew older, instead of growing out of this condition, as frequently happens, he developed an even more severe type of piety, and he suppressed as sinful and wicked the innocent merriment which forms a part of every normal life. The smile that would occasionally steal over his face dies in a frown of penitence, and the laughter of innocent jesting is swallowed up in the sigh of religious aspiration.

He seemed to have been of a gloomy and pessimistic cast of mind and found it easy to give hospitality to gloomy thoughts and opinions. He says that he is so constitutionally despondent that there is no hope of its cure except with the death of his body. On another occasion he says that he is "a true prophet of evil tidings, as it suits my cast of mind." If, then, we are to get a temperamental likeness, we must catch the saint in repose, the evangelist off duty, the bishop otherwise engaged, and the pessimist narrowed down to his normal pose. Such is the task of an actual portrayal of the human quality of this plain man with such complex reactions.

Asbury's Journal shows that he was an extremely sensitive soul. He was constantly apprehensive as to his own spiritual state, lest he should fail of his duty

and miss his high privilege in Christ. Hence, he records his failures and misgivings more often than he does any signs of success in his ministry. Then, as has been intimated, he was subject to frequent spells of morbid depression. He accuses himself of an "insensibility of soul," "backwardness to prayer," and "lack of devotion." Once he says: "I have been lately more subject to melancholy than for many years past, and how can I help it; the white and the worldly people are intolerably ignorant of God; playing, dancing, swearing, racing, these are common pursuits and practices." His correspondence with Rev. T. L. Douglass shows that he suffered greatly under the attacks of O'Kelly, and also because of the continued efforts to change the method of selecting the presiding elders.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to Asbury's temperamental gloom, there was the constant repression of himself in the interest of an ideal of piety which made no allowance for happiness that was not the direct effect of religious exaltation. From day to day he blames himself for trifling conversation, for talking and jesting, for freedom of temper, for a degree of cheerfulness bordering on levity, and for being too free in conversation with his friends. He finds it difficult to check the rapid flow of spirits when in company with his friends and reproves himself for a sudden and violent laugh upon being told that a certain man had given an old negro woman her freedom because she was too religious for him. Because of this repression of his natural feelings, it may be difficult to say what his distinctly human traits were; but there can be no doubt that the need for such censorship of spirit shows that he was thoroughly human.

<sup>3</sup> Bennett, *Memorials of Methodism in Virginia*, p. 584.

He was a man of extremely simple tastes. His passion for simplicity almost bordered upon the severe. He is said to have disliked ritual and form, and this is borne out by the simplicity and directness of his preaching and administration. His Journal shows that he had an antipathy for pews, bells, organs, and steeples. In Augusta, Georgia, he complains of the bell: "And, behold, here is a bell over the gallery!—and cracked too; may it break! It is the first I ever saw in a house of ours in America; I hope it will be the last." <sup>4</sup> On a visit to Connecticut he writes: "Sometimes we have a view of many churches and steeples, built very neatly of wood; either for use, ornament, piety, policy, or interest—or it may be some of all these." <sup>5</sup> His love for simplicity is shown further in his great appreciation of the unadorned ministry of some of the devout souls who labored with him. Such were "honest Daniel Ruff," John Tunnell, Cromwell, "Mr. Gough," and a man who "spoke a few broken words which affected the people more than all that had been said." He says: "Perhaps there never was such a work carried on by such simple men, of such small abilities, and no learning." <sup>6</sup> He remonstrated with the ladies about their "head-dresses," and Rev. Abner Chase says that, at the session of the Genesee Conference in 1813, he disapproved of the preachers' wearing "*pantaloons*" instead of knee breeches and buckles. <sup>7</sup> What might have happened if he had lived until our day!

Asbury's rigid censorship of himself was not suf-

<sup>4</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 240.

<sup>5</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. II, p. 118.

<sup>6</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 348.

<sup>7</sup> Chase, *Recollections of the Past*, p. 83.

ficient to keep back the humor which he so much feared. There is an unconscious humor in the grave innocence with which he records things that occurred. Of his preaching he says that his ideas left him and that he was ashamed of himself, while the people waited "to hear what the blunderer had to say." When he is provoked he goes to the Scripture for his words of malediction. It was the "sons of Belial" who divided the church in Philadelphia; and he makes the entry in his Journal: "On my way to P——'s I came on a race ground, where the sons of Belial had been practicing my horse; he ran away with me when he came to the end of the paths, but stopped, and I received no harm." <sup>8</sup>

There is also a humorous flavor about the way he tells certain incidents: "A troublesome little Irishman seemed much inclined to altercation." On one occasion when he was ill, Bishop M'Kendree's horse having fallen and crippled him, and their funds were low, he says, "as for the bishops, they were sick, lame and in poverty." He refers to a house where he held a three-hours' service in winter as being built of poles, and as having light and ventilators plenty. He said of Silas Mercer, a Baptist preacher, that he anathematized the whole race of kings from Saul to George the Third. Dr. Coke was a very small man, and Asbury tells of meeting him unexpectedly one day, "with a borrowed horse, and a large white boy riding behind him on the same horse." He describes one of his congregations as looking "like fat bulls of Bashan," and says something about "drenching a hardened sinner with religion." Speaking of an occasion where he had preached in North Carolina, he says: "When I had done, behold, F. Hill came into the room

<sup>8</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 419.

powdered off, with a number of fine ladies and gentlemen. As I could not get my horse and bags, I heard him out: I verily believe his sermon was his own, it was so much like his conversation.”<sup>9</sup>

By far the greater part of the humor of Bishop Asbury was cynical sarcasm and was often indicative of the sting he felt in his own heart. Sometimes it was a retort and sometimes an incisive observation. In a pass with an Episcopal clergyman who objected to his preaching he says: “I told him, if there were no swearers or other sinners, he was sufficient.” A Calvinist told him that he might experience all that Asbury had mentioned and yet go to hell. Asbury replied that Satan experienced more and “yet is gone to hell.” He ridiculed the opposers of his work as “saints of the world,” and as desiring “prophets of drink.” When he sat for his portrait in 1794 he says: “Those who have gone from us in Virginia have drawn a picture of me, which is not *taken from the life*.” In this he refers to the troubles with James O’Kelly. Of the removal of the capitol from Williamsburg, Virginia, he remarks: “Thus the worldly glory is departed from it; as for divine glory it never had any.” He wished that the wife of a certain brother might not “love him to death,” and he thinks that “elder Straight is crooked enough.” Many such passages as these appear in his Journal, and they usually refer to persons and places who had given him trouble.

There can be little doubt that Asbury had the right to be regarded as the “Gloomy Dean” of American Methodism, but despite his rigid and almost strait-jacket discipline of himself he shows a very pronounced

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 493.



sense of humor. It is always of a grim and subdued type, but unmistakable in its force and flavor. Apart from his repressed humor he had a fund of interesting anecdotes and incidents, which he would sometimes draw upon with great effectiveness. Henry Boehm says that at times he was Napoleonic in his moods and silences, but at other times would charm the circle where he was guest. He cites an evening at Colonel Putnam's, where a group of Revolutionary officers and their ladies were invited in and the Bishop took an active part in the animated and interesting conversation of the evening.<sup>10</sup> A similar instance is related by Dr. George Peck. In 1814 Asbury walked the floor and interested the preachers with the stories which he told.<sup>11</sup>

The supreme emphasis of the ministry of Bishop Asbury was such that he could very properly say, "I am a man of one work"; but he was not deprived on that account of his native appreciation and common sense. An interesting letter to John Kobler in 1795 solicits his aid in trading a horse. Asbury tells him that he wants to pay four or five guineas' difference, and that the horse must be "good size, young, 5 years old, well gaited, and good life."<sup>12</sup> That would still be a good bill of specifications in the blue-grass country, where John Kobler lived.

Asbury's personal traits have been sometimes recited to his disadvantage and even to his discredit. Such would naturally happen where there were so many occasions for conflict as existed in his career. But there

<sup>10</sup> Boehm, *Reminiscences*, p. 317.

<sup>11</sup> Peck, *Early Methodism*, p. 425.

<sup>12</sup> Drew MSS.

was a moral and spiritual exaltation about the man which one must appreciate. Of one of his bitterest contests he says: "I have said more than was for the glory of God concerning those who have left the American connection." In correcting his Journal for publication he says: "I have buried in shades all that will be proper to forget, in which I am personally concerned; if truth and I have been wronged, we have both witnessed our day of triumph."<sup>13</sup> A bishop who would sell his watch, his cloak, and his shirt to supply his needy preachers must have established for himself a bond of abiding interest with all the people. Henry Boehm says that he watched the faces of his preachers for signs of injury due to climate, and the moment such appeared he moved them to places where they might be restored. He loved his friends with a real passion; he suffered on account of the slaves; and he loved the horse that was forced to share his own privations. He sold "poor Spark," and Asbury says that as he left "he whickered after us; it went to my heart—poor slave; how much toil has he patiently endured for me."<sup>14</sup>

His evangelistic aspiration was such that he relates only the things that are connected with the ministry of salvation—no teas, no functions, and few marriages. It was an austere ministry of the Word. One cannot read his apostolic rejoicings on account of the evangelistic success of his work without being made to feel the striking contrast which it offers to the gloating publicity of the evangelistic reports of a later time. He placed no gate-keeper on the "saw-dust trail," he had no registration cards to pass out, and he sent no

<sup>13</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 454.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 370.



reporters to the doors of other churches on the following Sabbath; but the ever-increasing host of Methodists told of the effectiveness of his simple Gospel ministry. His hope for those whom he gathered in was anchored beyond the stars. He was human to the core, but his humanity was refined and exalted by his own great conception of life.

In his early years his humanity is overlaid by the exuberant and passionate devotion of his evangelistic purpose. In middle life he was made more combative and vigorous in his feelings by the fierce contests which he had to wage. At the last, when he had turned the crest of power, he retains the scars of conflict; but there was an obvious softening of his manner and a manifest ripening of his heart. He visits the sick and lonely O'Kelly who had opposed him with such bitterness; he laments over the vacant chairs at familiar hearthstones; he weeps at the grave of Mary Tiffin; he lingers in the twilight of days that have gone forever; and "little Jane," "Spark," and "Fox" speak to him of the lonely journeyings when they bore him through the wilderness and over the mountains on his quest for souls. His great human quality shines through the shadows.

CHAPTER VIII  
AN ADMINISTRATOR

"His (Asbury's) peculiar talent was for governing the preachers, and taking care of the Church of Christ."

—LEROY M. LEE, *Life and Times of Jesse Lee*

"Mr. Asbury was firm yet conciliatory, efficient yet unassuming, decided yet not dictatorial, strict yet mild."

—LARRABEE, *Asbury and His Coadjutors*

"His common sense and administrative abilities have never been excelled in America either in Church or State. Even Lincoln had not so long and full a test upon this subject as had Asbury."

—BISHOP J. W. BASHFORD

"In the wisdom of his administration and the success of his plans, few, if any, have surpassed him."

—JOHN MILEY, in *Harper's Magazine*

"Asbury had a military mind, and his organization of forces was complete. The bishop first, then the elder, the preacher in charge, the junior preacher, the local preacher, the class leader; there was supervision from the top to the bottom."

—SMITH, *Francis Asbury*

"When Saladin looked at the sword of Richard Coeur de Lion, he wondered that a blade so ordinary should have wrought such mighty deeds. The English king bared his arm, and said: 'It was not the sword that did these things; it was the arm of Richard.'"

—*The Christian World Pulpit*

## CHAPTER VIII

### AN ADMINISTRATOR

THE administrative ability of Francis Asbury has never received the consideration to which it is entitled. Some of his interpreters speak of him as a man of the mental stamp of Napoleon and resort to other sweeping generalities. Such an appeal to the imagination of the reader may have its value, but it falls short of explaining the administrative quality of the man. His energy and his devotion were great factors in his ministry and work, but one can hardly feel that these qualities alone would have been sufficient to explain the rise and solid development of the Methodist Church. This is made all the more impressive by reason of the fact that its organization and polity have remained, in principle, much the same as they were when Asbury transmitted them to his successors more than a hundred years ago.

The processes of administration in the American Methodist Church are so different from those of British Methodism as to indicate not only a different environment but also a different guiding hand. The searcher for the genius of the pioneer days cannot miss the name of Asbury, for he is so outstanding as to be almost a solitary figure in the formative period of American Methodism, no less in his self-sacrificing toil and travel than in his capacity for building.

The administration of Asbury occupied such an uncharted field, and his personality was so unique, that it is not easy to discover fixed principles of procedure in what he did. Where there is a marked individuality, this is always true; and the total absence of conventional and established method adds to the difficulty. His power was so nearly absolute as to make an analysis of his administration little less than an analysis of that elusive thing which we call personality. In addition to the unusual scope of his powers, his task was so unsystematized as to make him a lifelong organizer rather than an administrator in the common acceptance of the term. However, in what he did there are the evidences of administrative ability which are worthy of careful study.

Asbury inherited a system of theology and a disciplinary method which made him seem at first to be practically an understudy of Mr. Wesley. In reality, however, he never saw eye to eye with Mr. Wesley, or with anyone else. His association with Thomas Rankin revealed his independence of mind, for he was never able to agree with Rankin's administrative ideas. Although Mr. Wesley had appointed Rankin to be the head of the American mission, we find Asbury again and again stoutly resisting the insistent demands of his chief. When the issues of the Revolution came to be discussed and it was necessary to decide upon a course of action, he stood against the counsel and purpose of his fellow countrymen; and he resolved to stay on at whatever cost to himself. It will be to Asbury's eternal credit that in the organization of the church he refused to be in any sense the administrative deputy of Mr. Wesley. His clashes with Lee, Snethen, and O'Kelly

constitute a very real part of the history of the first thirty years of the Methodist Church. It cannot be disputed, then, that Asbury was an administrator in his own right.

As has been intimated, the administrative policy of Bishop Asbury was thoroughly individualistic. In the reminiscences of those who traveled with him there is little to indicate that he ever sought their counsel except indirectly as he might disclose his own mind. In the approach to his problems of every kind he seems to have been a man of almost mystical penetration. He had an intuitive understanding of men and a common-sense grasp of situations which defy analysis. Many things, which proved to be pivotal decisions which were timed and executed with unerring precision, he seemed to do in a perfectly casual way. A case in point is his refusal to accept Mr. Wesley's designation for the general superintendency of the American church, to which allusion has been made already. His reason for demanding election by the General Conference is not apparent to the casual reader; but it had in it the principle of independence for the church that was to be established, and it is safe to say that no administrative stroke was ever more purposefully proposed or more skillfully executed.

Asbury's individualism did not rest upon theoretical opinions; it was ruggedly practical. This is exemplified in the manner of his fitting into the Revolutionary crisis, in the unconventionality of his administration of all the affairs of the church—even the proceedings of the General Conference—and in the plain and blunt directness with which he dealt with the matters that came up. In 1814 the Virginia Conference met in Nor-

folk. During the session there occurred a lively debate on the Disciplinary rule as to dress. Asbury listened until he thought it had gone far enough, when he arose and said "that he had travelled more extensively than any preacher in the connection, and he could say that, with a few exceptions, the Methodist women were the plainest in the land. And as to the rule proscribing 'high heads and enormous bonnets,' he was sure that not one of the preachers had ever seen such things; nor the 'ruffles and rings' alluded to by Wesley." He then made certain comparisons favorable to Methodist women, and there the matter ended.<sup>1</sup>

The enemies of Asbury said many hard and uncomplimentary things about him, which need not be answered now, for time has given adequate reply to all impeachments of his character and heart. It is not our part to say that he did not rule with an iron hand. He did rule in that way; but with all his preëminence of position and ability he did not become an intolerable autocrat, and that is certainly to his credit. He may have appeared to be lacking in sentiment, which was not the case; but sentiment is no part of effective administration in great affairs. He simply carried responsibility in the only way that he knew—it was his own burden.

As an administrator, Bishop Asbury was more than simply a man of intuitive understanding and practical originality. He was very much more thoroughgoing in his investigations than he has received credit for being, or than might be judged from his Journal, which is altogether lacking in detail. There are evidences that he was a careful and even statistical student of his whole

<sup>1</sup> Bennett, *Memorials of Methodism in Virginia*, p. 597.



field and its personnel. He never allowed any hardship or personal discomfort to prevent his annual inspection of the entire territory from Massachusetts to Georgia, and in addition to his visits he wrote more than a thousand letters a year, by which he was kept informed concerning the work at all times.

Henry Boehm says that he planned his work ahead and that most of his appointments were made before the Conference met.<sup>2</sup> When he was almost at the end of his career, he told Bishop M'Kendree that he would never present a plan of the stations until he had perfected it as far as was possible through available information, and by submitting it to those who ought to see it.<sup>3</sup> Rev. Abner Chase recites an incident which bears out the fact of his painstaking study of men. One day Rev. John Kline called at the Bishop's room in New York. As the Bishop stepped out of the room, Kline picked up a book that was on the table and opened it at an entry concerning himself: "John Kline, a man of small preaching talents, but thought to be pious and useful."<sup>4</sup> The writer says: "He did not seem displeased at the discovery of the estimate made of his preaching talents, but went cheerfully on in his work for several years following." Henry Boehm also refers to this book. Asbury's care in recording facts concerning his preachers shows that he neglected no source or means of information that might help to make him effective in handling the responsibility which rested upon him, and that he was not controlled by his impressions.

Another characteristic of Asbury's administrative

<sup>2</sup> Boehm, *Reminiscences*, p. 439.

<sup>3</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 465.

<sup>4</sup> Chase, *Recollections of the Past*, pp. 49, 50.

method was the fact that his careful study of the field was made more effective by his quick interpretation of the reactions of other people. A little thing seems to have been to him oftentimes a projection of the thinking of the people, and seizing upon that he would reach a conclusion and decide upon a course of action before the people had become conscious of their own thoughts. An instance of this was his change of episcopal manners and dress following a criticism by Jesse Lee. After his ordination he adopted the garb of a bishop in the English Church, but in the protest of one man, so far as we know, he grasped the trend of American feeling, and the gown and bands disappeared before general criticism could be formulated.

Reference has been made to his demand for election by the Conference before he would consent to accept ordination to the episcopacy. Thomas Ware says that he replied to the notification that Mr. Wesley had designated him for the superintendency by saying, "Doctor, we will call the preachers together, and the voice of the preachers shall be to me the voice of God."<sup>5</sup> From the beginning Asbury seems to have sensed the inevitable issue, and to have resolved upon a course for securing the independence of the American church that would result in the least hurt to the feelings of Mr. Wesley. The church did not follow the course that he marked out, but, in the necessity for rescinding the resolution declaring allegiance to Mr. Wesley, it came to understand Asbury's wisdom.

His forecasting was not limited to a mere anticipation of problems, for he was equally able to forecast development and need, and in that way make ready

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Ware, *Methodist Magazine*, New York, 1832, p. 97.

to care for the work without emergency measures. As he went up and down the country, he was looking out for likely men and making appeals to them to enter the traveling connection; and he sought those who had "desisted" in the effort to have them travel again. He had the eye of a prophet and saw the day of great things in the ranks of Methodism. Standing one day upon the crest of the Alleghenies, he had a vision of a spiritual empire in the great valley. He says: "There were four or five hundred crossing the rude hills whilst we were: I was powerfully struck with the consideration that there were at least as many thousand emigrants annually from east to west: we must take care to send preachers after these people." <sup>6</sup> When he relinquished the task to M'Kendree, his face was set toward the West and its glory—"Ohio, Kentucky, Holston, Mississippi, and Missouri." <sup>7</sup> This ability to forecast his task contributed much to his evangelistic effectiveness and administrative success.

What was true of Asbury's efforts to have the church keep pace with the rapidly expanding settlements was equally true of his wise and consistent planning to meet the racial and linguistic difficulties of the field. Henry Boehm was his missionary to the Germans. In the letter to Dr. Benson, <sup>8</sup> he says: "One thing more. Upon this continent we are crowded with French people, like polite heathens and barbarians to us. We want French Methodist preachers—despairing of obtaining any from the travelling connexion, since we have read your reports our only hope is that some of our local brethren from Jersey or Guernsey will come

<sup>6</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 132.

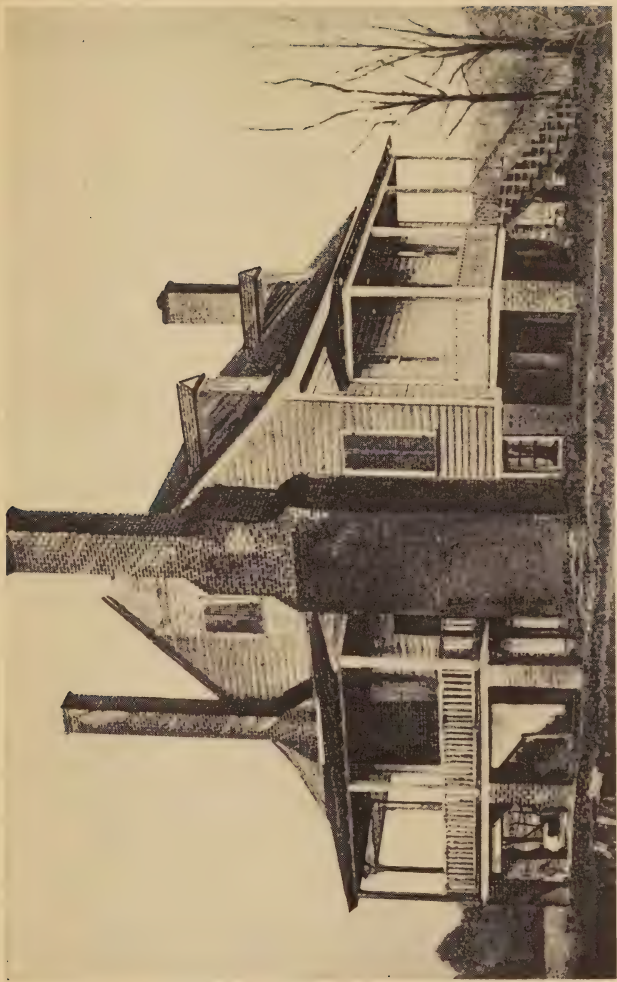
<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 465. <sup>8</sup> See Appendix.

over and help us. We have employed an accomplished young Frenchman of an extensive acquaintance with the French Methodists in those Islands, to see if such a man as we want can be obtained. Can you aid us in this matter?" There he was, down with an attack of influenza and within two and a half months of his death, but facing resolutely the complex problems of his work.

Francis Asbury, as an administrator, saw more than the opportunity for conquest. He saw, also, the necessity for fortifying, if the fruits of his toil were to abide, and if the vision of a greater empire were to be realized. He saw the danger in the unlimited authority of a General Conference, and his foresight set him to work to find safeguards for the vital things of the Methodist system. It does not seem unlikely that the ill-fated Council had such a purpose; and it is practically certain that the delegated General Conference, with its restrictions, was the plan which Asbury conceived for protecting Methodism against moments of excitement or the fatal resolutions of a majority. In the address to the General Conference, which he left unfinished, his mind is still grappling with the problems of peace, union, and progress. He recommends a "General Committee of Safety" for digesting motions and resolutions likely to bring disunion and confusion.<sup>9</sup> In these efforts to conserve what had been achieved, it is manifest that his foresight played a tremendous part in making his leadership and administration effective in those formative years.

But if Asbury understood his problem, he understood equally well the psychology of effective appeal.

<sup>9</sup> *The Christian Advocate*, New York, March 16, 1916.



GREEN HILL HOUSE NEAR LOUISBURG, NORTH CAROLINA, IN WHICH BISHOP ASBURY HELD HIS  
FIRST CONFERENCE, APRIL 19, 1785





He was able thus to adapt his administration to the mental states of his preachers and people. Henry Boehm says that he frequently had his horse at the door, and as soon as he had finished reading the appointments he would mount and be gone. He did not do this to escape responsibility, but because he knew that the dissatisfactions of the preachers were for the most part superficial and would take care of themselves if left alone. Boehm says, also, that there were times when he was as uncommunicative as the sphinx. He knew when to keep silent.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Asbury was equally discerning as to the place and value of well-timed speech. An illustration of this is his course following the agreement with the Virginia brethren on the ordinance question. He knew that it was a time to speak, so he abandoned every other plan and interest and made a tour of Virginia and North Carolina, that he might set the minds of the Methodist people at rest regarding this very important issue. On another occasion he shows his understanding of the psychological value of generous sentiments. In connection with the O'Kelly troubles of 1792, he records in his Journal: "We agreed to let our displeased brethren still preach among us; and as Mr. O'Kelly is almost worn out, the conference acceded to my proposal to give him his forty pounds per annum, as when he travelled in the connexion, provided he was peaceable, and forbore to excite divisions among the brethren."<sup>11</sup> This, of course, was a matter of Christian charity, but it was at the same time a fine piece of administrative diplomacy.

<sup>10</sup> Boehm, *Reminiscences*, p. 440.

<sup>11</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. II, p. 174.



Bishop Asbury was equally skilled in the psychology of attack. Attention has been directed to this by Herbert Asbury, in connection with his use of Lorenzo Dow and Peter Cartwright in the way that the military strategists used shock troops during the World War.<sup>12</sup> These eccentric characters would be sent to the frontier settlements to create an interest and an atmosphere for the constructive men who were to follow immediately and establish the work in the new fields. It is not necessary to say that a finer piece of administrative strategy has not been displayed in any period of the history of the church.

It must not be thought that Asbury's administration depended mainly upon ecclesiastical tactics for its effectiveness. His first and chief dependence was upon spiritual verities, and he knew the value of the religious appeal. In February, 1811, he went to Richmond, Virginia, where he found the Shockoe Hill church roofed in, but in debt, and the people so discouraged that they had about decided to abandon the whole enterprise. Asbury undertook no campaign for money. On Sunday morning he called together a few of the leading members; they went into the open and unfinished building and there held a prayer meeting on some loose boards laid down for a floor. The little group went forth from that prayer service, rekindled the expiring flame with the fervor of their own hearts, and the church was saved.<sup>13</sup> Before he was called to the episcopacy he wrote in his journal: "I see clearly that to press the people to holiness is the proper method to take them from contending for ordinances, or any less

<sup>12</sup> Herbert Asbury, *A Methodist Saint*, p. 237.

<sup>13</sup> Pell, *A Hundred Years of Richmond Methodism*, p. 34.

consequential thing.”<sup>14</sup> Many such instances might be cited, but these are sufficient to show his great use of the spiritual appeal.

No study of Asbury as an administrator can be complete without some notice of the unselfish service which he taught and exemplified. Indeed, his whole career was characterized by a Christlike ministry to human need. “I rode seventeen miles to see a saint indeed; a woman confined to her bed for fifteen years.” “Being informed that Mrs. P. was dangerously ill, I rode about twenty miles to see her.” In the frequent scourges of yellow fever, which came to Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York, he faltered not for any peril to himself. He says: “I wrote to our brethren in the city stations, not to neglect the sick for an hour, nor an absentee from class one week.” From the beginning of his ministry in America to his death, Asbury was himself the leader in the service which he required of others. And it was the service rendered which won the people to the Methodist cause.

Who will undertake to say what were the real depths of Asbury’s administrative ability? He knew little of technical rules or conventional grace; but he knew his field of labor and he knew the hearts of men. He possessed the energy of body, of mind, and of heart required for his task and his day. He knew God in an experience that was not to be discounted; and he believed in His sufficiency for the completion of what was conscientiously undertaken in his name. Thus equipped, he gave to the world a chapter in church history which has not been surpassed; and through that chapter his fame as an administrator is made secure.

<sup>14</sup> Asbury’s Journal, Vol. I, p. 369.



CHAPTER IX  
ADMINISTRATIVE CONTESTS

"Our conference began. The overbearing spirit of a certain person had excited my fears. My judgment was stubbornly opposed for a while, and at last submitted to."

"I received a letter from the presiding elder of this district, James O'Kelly: he makes heavy complaints of my power, and bids me stop for one year, or he must use his influence against me."

"We had heavy debates on the first, second, and third sections of our form of discipline. My power to station the preachers without an appeal, was much debated, but finally carried by a very large majority."

"After a serious struggle of two days in General Conference to change the mode of appointing presiding elders, it remains as it was. . . . Lee, Shinn, and Snethen were of a side; and these are great men."

"I also received an affectionate letter from Mr. Wesley, and am truly sorry that the venerable man ever dipped into the politics of America."

"I did not think it practical expediency to obey Mr. Wesley, at three thousand miles' distance, in all matters relative to church government."

—*Asbury's Journal*

## CHAPTER IX

### ADMINISTRATIVE CONTESTS

THE contests in which Asbury engaged probably offer better opportunities for discovering his true character than any other phase of his career. There we can learn of the quality of his soul, the genuineness of his courage, the sufficiency of his gifts, and the reality of his religion. It seems, however, that little effort has been put forth to show the stern and sterling manhood that was back of those administrative encounters. This is the case, perhaps, because Asbury, whose Journal furnishes so large a part of the material with reference to his work, was unjust to himself in that he made comparatively no record of his contests.

In all the history of the Methodist Church no man had to face a more determined opposition, or to meet attacks upon his administration that were more persistent and personal; and no man ever came off more victoriously in them all than he did. No field, therefore, offers richer material for the interpretation of his life and character, or for a truer understanding of his poise and power. The real vigor of his mind and the iron of his will cannot be conceived except as we know that back of the bitterness of his enemies was a fierceness of struggle of which comparatively little has been told. The men who opposed him and those who heaped

anathemas upon his head were not simply dispensers of unprovoked censure. They believed what they said, and above all they realized that his will was the rock upon which their plans and hopes were broken; and by their very anathemas they paid tribute to an element of his character which the church has been slow to understand.

There were certain matters concerning which he refused to enter into controversy, and he discouraged controversy in others. But this does not mean that he was in any sense a passive man in meeting the responsibilities of administration. His Journal shows that he came to America with very definite ideas as to principle and procedure in the execution of his missionary task, and he was not given to compromises where conviction was involved. The men who came to have the highest appreciation of the ability of Asbury were those who found it necessary to measure swords with him on matters of administration.

The Methodist Church had its beginning at a time when the spirit of independence was at the zenith; and it could not be expected that its leadership would be exempt from the challenges of the day. Asbury certainly did not become eminent by a process of abandonment, but was forced to contest every vital issue and to meet some of the ablest and most upstanding men of pioneer days. Among those whom he had to oppose were Thomas Rankin, James O'Kelly, Jesse Lee, and Mr. Wesley. They were not all of the same order of ability, and the causes of conflict with them differed; but they all came to realize who was the real genius of Methodism in America.

Naturally the first man to contest the way of Asbury



was Thomas Rankin. It is not necessary to defame Rankin in order to justify Asbury. He was probably a sincere and devoted man, he had convictions, and he had ability, else Mr. Wesley would never have placed him over the whole work. But he was of imperious nature, fiery temper, and stubborn will. Such a man is apt to lack the patience and the range of thought required to deal happily and successfully with a vigorous and strong-minded man who opposes him. Rankin was not tactful and he did not learn by the mistakes that he made. Tyerman says that more than once after he returned to his native land he was rebuked by Mr. Wesley for exhibitions of temper,<sup>1</sup> and his stubborn aggressiveness with reference to Asbury shows how little he was able to bear serious opposition.

Asbury, too, had an imperious nature and a determined will, but he succeeded where Rankin failed largely because he had an endowment of practical common sense which enabled him to adjust himself to conditions in a more effective way. He felt an almost instinctive antagonism toward Rankin, but he was too shrewd and discerning to surrender to such a feeling. He was not intimidated by the experience and authority of the man whom Mr. Wesley had appointed over him and does not seem to have been particularly careful to avoid conflict. He was frank and outspoken in whatever issue arose.

The worst feature of Rankin's opposition was neither his obstinacy nor his arrogance, but that he acted as an informer and prejudiced the mind of Mr. Wesley against Asbury. In a letter to Dr. Joseph Benson,

<sup>1</sup> Tyerman, *Life and Times of John Wesley*, Vol. III, pp. 510, 567.

which Asbury dictated two and a half months before his death, he goes into Rankin's activity at length. He never calls his name once, but there can be no doubt as to who is meant when he speaks of "Diotrephes," and an "enemy"; and he quotes Dr. Coke and John Harper as authority for the charges which he makes.<sup>2</sup> The activity of which Asbury complained took place after Rankin's return to England, and for that reason the representations of Rankin could not be answered immediately or effectively. At the time of this letter Rankin had been dead six years and Asbury is seeking to bring about a better understanding between the English and American Methodists. But the struggle had been such that the very "shades" of Rankin irritated Asbury; and the intensity of his feeling comes out in the withering sarcasm of the words, "Diotrephes, late of the Tower of London." The allusion is to Rankin's influence over Mr. Wesley, through which he had himself kept in London for ten years, which Asbury evidently felt to have been contrary to the spirit and practice of the itinerancy. Asbury's triumph was complete, but Rankin was too human to admit it with becoming grace—even the grace of silence. It is certain that Asbury carried unhappy recollections of the contest to the end.

The next foeman to enter the lists with Asbury was James O'Kelly of Virginia. He was probably the most vigorous and pronounced opponent of episcopal authority at the time; and he had real ability and real fighting courage. No sooner did the ill-fated Council fall than he set himself to reduce the episcopacy to a mere shadow of authority, by seeking to secure the

<sup>2</sup> Candler School of Theology MSS. (See Appendix.)

right of appeal from the appointment of the bishop and to make the presiding eldership elective. He brought every resource at his disposal to bear in the fight; but he was no match for Asbury, and he was so chagrined by his overwhelming defeat that he withdrew from the connection and sowed the seeds of dissension in the Methodist ranks.

Like Rankin, he was not able to confine his attacks to the official, and the contest was one of the bitterest ever waged against Asbury. The very bitterness of O'Kelly's soul is valid testimony concerning the completeness of Asbury's triumph. Years afterward O'Kelly was sick in Maryland and Asbury offered to pay him a visit, which he had the grace to accept. Victor and vanquished met, not to review the conflict, but to look together toward the goal of their hopes where contests are ended.<sup>3</sup> No other trouble in the more than thirty years of Asbury's episcopal career occupied so large a part of his attention, and many were the scars left in his heart.

Jesse Lee was a man of prominence, as is shown by the fact that he failed of election to the episcopacy after a tie with Whatcoat, who was elected on the next ballot following the tie. He had some eccentricities, but he was a man of ability. He was a staunch opposer of the Council, and his opposition was probably more effective than that of James O'Kelly. When O'Kelly withdrew from the church, Jesse Lee succeeded to his advocacy of an elective presiding eldership. With Lee, however, this advocacy was the result of his own pronounced democratic leanings, and he does not appear to have been consciously influenced by selfish ambitions. He

<sup>3</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 82.

was an able fighter, and for a long time the fate of the issue was in doubt; but at last Asbury was victorious. The sharpness of the conflict came out when the Conference declined to publish Lee's *History of the Methodists*, which Asbury did not think correctly represented his administration.

From this time on, Lee's antagonism to Asbury became more pronounced. His attacks upon the bishops became bitter, and he was so indiscreet and indiscriminate in his charges that he was brought to trial by the Virginia Conference for slander and was required to make suitable apology for his indiscretions.<sup>4</sup> The last chapter in the sad story of his defeat was a letter dated from Nancymond, Virginia, April 10, 1815. It betrays his bitterness on account of defeats and humiliations which he charges to Asbury.<sup>5</sup> It would not be fair to the memory of so good a fighter to quote the unhappy phrases of his wounded heart. He was simply an old and defeated man, and he could not forgive the victor.

The last in the line of great contenders is Mr. Wesley. There has been too great a disposition to force Asbury and the early American Methodists into a position of abject loyalty to Mr. Wesley, regardless of the wisdom or the unwisdom of his policy. One who is at all familiar with the real Asbury does not need to be told that this cannot be done. He had the profoundest respect for Mr. Wesley. In the letter to Dr. Benson already referred to, he says: "I perfectly clear him in my own mind," and this expression refers to Mr. Wesley's feeling against Asbury and the American Methodists. The letter further shows Asbury's devotion to Mr. Wesley by the plea which he makes

<sup>4</sup> Candler School of Theology MSS.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

*To the President of the United States*

As the members of the Methodist Episcopal Church residing beyond the Atlantic have been chiefly collected in the United States to signify to you the warm feelings of our hearts, and our sincere congratulations on your appointment to the Presidency of that State. We are inspired from the sacred promises you have already given that you are a friend of mankind and under the influence of the Holy Spirit a full confidence in your wisdom and integrity for the prosecution of those civil and religious liberties which were first committed to us by the providence of God, and the glorious resurrection, as we believe ought to be signified in them.

We have received the most gratified satisfaction from the humble and entire assent to the great goodness of the measure which you have repeatedly expressed, acknowledging from the source of our blessings and partakers of the most precious constitution of that State, which is at present the admiration of the world, and may in future become its great exemplar for imitation and hence we ever with satisfaction that you always will prove a faithful and unshaken friend of genuine total abolition - the great end of our creation and final probationary influence. And we present you our fervent prayers to the throne of grace that God abundantly may endue you with all the grace and gifts of his Holy Spirit that may enable you to fill up your important station to our glory, the good of his Church, the happiness and prosperity of the United States, and the welfare of mankind.

Signed in behalf of the Methodist Episcopal Church

Thomas Coke

James O. Murray

New York  
May 29, 1789

From Washington Papers in the Library of Congress.

RESOLUTIONS OF THE NEW YORK CONFERENCE PRESENTED TO PRESIDENT WASHINGTON BY BISHOP-ASBURY, MAY 29, 1789



to Dr. Benson that Whitehead's *Life of Wesley* be corrected or else that it be suppressed, for the reason that it so distorts his position as to be really a defamation of Mr. Wesley's character. But loyal as Asbury was to the personal character of Mr. Wesley, he did not feel bound to accept without question his ideas of administration in America, and he certainly did not do so.

It will be recalled that the first Societies in America were begun by Philip Embury, Barbara Heck, and Robert Strawbridge; and this American beginning was without either the ordering or the knowledge of Mr. Wesley. The first missionaries were sent over as helpers, in response to appeals from the little groups already organized. Some time after the arrival of Asbury, he was made "general assistant" by Mr. Wesley; but in less than a year Rankin came over with authority to supersede Asbury as head of the Societies in America. The authority of Mr. Wesley was tacitly recognized from the first; but there was no formal recognition of it until the meeting of the first Conference, July 14, 1773, as may be seen from the answer to the first question in the minutes of that session.<sup>6</sup> Thomas Rankin remained the official head of the American mission until he left the field on account of the war.

The *English Minutes* show that from 1776 to 1784 Mr. Wesley made no appointments for America. The membership statistics were carried for three years, but for the last five years no mention is made of America.<sup>7</sup> War feeling forced Asbury into retirement in Dela-

<sup>6</sup> *Methodist Conferences, 1773 to 1813*, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> *English Minutes*, Vol. I, pp. 125-170.



ware, and the cause of the Methodists was seriously imperiled through the absence of the control under which it had been developed. So, at the Conference called to meet in Kent County, Delaware, in 1779, the question is asked: "Ought not brother Asbury to act as General Assistant in America?" The answer is: "He ought: 1st, on account of his age; 2nd, because originally appointed by Mr. Wesley; 3rd, being joined with Messrs. Rankin and Shadford by express order from Mr. Wesley."<sup>8</sup> Since these minutes were written by Asbury himself, some feel that there must have been an instruction from Mr. Wesley making him equal with Rankin in directing the affairs of the Societies. But no such document has ever come to light and, as is well known, Asbury did not have equal authority while Rankin remained on the field. The statement of the Kent County minutes does not seem to refer to any restoration of authority, but almost certainly to the fact that in the *English Minutes* of 1774, Rankin, Shadford, and Asbury are listed together in the group of "Assistants" for the whole Wesleyan connection.<sup>9</sup> This is the only time that it so occurs, and the greater authority of Rankin was not affected by it. Asbury, who wrote the Minutes, simply uses these three factors in a constructive answer for justifying his assumption of control. It means that historically and personally Asbury was the man indicated for leadership in the emergency that had arisen.

The record of Asbury does not bear out the contention that he exercised slavish concern as to technical authority from Mr. Wesley, or from anyone else. Once

<sup>8</sup> *Methodist Conferences*, 1773 to 1813, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> *English Minutes*, Vol. I, p. III.

in a defense of the episcopacy he says: "The Methodists acknowledge no superiority but what is founded on seniority, election, and long and faithful service."<sup>10</sup> In another place he names five items upon which he bases his authority: "1. Divine authority. 2. Seniority in America. 3. The election of the General Conference. 4. My ordination by Thomas Coke, . . . 5. Because the signs of an apostle have been seen in me."<sup>11</sup> He does not mention the appointment by Mr. Wesley. It is equally certain, also, that Mr. Wesley did not consider him as having authority, for on January 24, 1784, there is an entry in Asbury's Journal saying that he received a letter from Mr. Wesley "in which he directs me to act as general assistant."<sup>12</sup> This view is confirmed by plain and unequivocal statements in Asbury's letter to Dr. Joseph Benson. He tells him: "He possessed a senior right after the removal of Boardman and Pilmoor," and says further: "Francis thought as he had possession 'twas best to hold it, especially when abundance of respectable members said, 'Will you leave us? Will you leave us?' "<sup>13</sup>

There does not seem to be any reasonable doubt that Asbury sought to remove Mr. Wesley from absolute control over the American church, not from any selfish motive, but from the conviction that to do otherwise would be to consent to the ruin of the cause. He recites the influence of Rankin upon Mr. Wesley and says: "Our dear Father, from the time of the Revolution to his death, grew more and more jealous of myself and the whole American connexion: that it appeared we had lost his confidence almost entirely. But he rigidly

<sup>10</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 139.

<sup>12</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 468.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix.

contended for a special and independent right of governing the chief minister or ministers of our order, which in our judgment went not only to put him out of office, but remove him from the continent to elsewhere that our Father saw fit; and that notwithstanding our constitution, and the right of electing every church officer, and more especially our Superintendent.”<sup>14</sup> This statement is too plain to need elaboration.

Asbury points out the fact that Mr. Wesley's distrust was so pronounced that “we were called upon to give a printed obligation.” He refers to the minute acknowledging the authority of Mr. Wesley, which was adopted at the organization of the church in 1784, and to which Asbury says he was opposed. This minute was afterward rescinded, and Mr. Wesley was much offended. There is an eloquence in what Asbury does not say, and back of his silence is certainly the conviction that Mr. Wesley could not direct the affairs of the American church. He says that he was too far away; and he might have added that he did not understand either the American situation or the American mind.

To say that Asbury was morally bound to yield to the wishes of Mr. Wesley would be to place his feelings above the claims of the Kingdom of God, and this Asbury could not do. It is true that he came over by the direction of Mr. Wesley, but he was preëminently an ambassador for Jesus Christ, and it was the profound consciousness of this relation that shaped his whole course touching Mr. Wesley's elimination from absolute control. It was a distressing necessity, for he

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix.

held Mr. Wesley in great and affectionate esteem; but the step was made necessary by his recognition of the higher interest he must serve.

Religiously Asbury was one of the most devoted and knightly warriors for truth and righteousness that ever wielded the weapons of Christian warfare in any land. As a man and administrator, he was one of the most courageous, upstanding, and effective men that molded the history of religion in the New World. He lacked the polish and the grace of the leaders of the Old World, but what he lacked in this particular he more than made up by the untamed audacity of his rugged soul. The real Asbury was nobody's appointee, nor was he the creature of favor, merited or otherwise. It was through vigorous contests that he won his pre-eminence, and in winning for himself he established the Methodist Church upon a stable foundation, and brought to it the independence of spirit and action necessary to develop it into a great and useful force for righteousness and truth.



CHAPTER X .  
ASBURY'S DEVOTIONAL LIFE

"I am going to live for God, and to bring others so to do."

—*Asbury's Journal*

"He prayed the best, and he prayed the most of any man I ever knew."

—FREEBORN GARRETSON

"But heaven is my object, not earth. This springs my mind, and makes my burden light.

—*Asbury's Journal*

"He was a purely-pious and deeply-devoted man. He was a man of faith and prayer."

—LARRABEE, *Asbury and His Coadjutors*

"His experience of Divine things was deep and genuine, glorying in naught but 'Jesus Christ, and him crucified,' saying, 'I rejoice continually in the perfect love of God.'"

—BANGS, Introduction to *The Pioneer Bishop*

"The language of the holy psalmist was that of his adoring heart: 'Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon the earth I desire beside thee.' This was not a fitful feeling, it was the steady, living experience of Asbury for fifty-five years. He toiled not alone because it was his duty to labor, but because he delighted to do the will of Him whom his soul loved."

—ATKINSON, *Centennial History of American Methodism*



## CHAPTER X

### ASBURY'S DEVOTIONAL LIFE

FOR more than a hundred years Francis Asbury has been measured by the record of his travels and of his success in administration. These have been largely accepted as explaining his remarkable career, and surely the man cannot be explained without them. But, important as was his toil in carrying the gospel to the scattered settlements, and remarkable as was his ability in organizing and directing the church, there are still other factors which must be taken into consideration in the estimate of his character. By no means the least of these is his devotional life.

In view of a somewhat confused understanding, it may be well to say a few words of a general nature concerning devotional life. True devotional life represents the originality of the soul in its contact with God, and not the style of a generation. Much that is offered as such is too superficial to express the depths of God's purpose for the salvation of the world. Much that passes for devotional life appears to be little more than a process of self-laudation, and this is true whether the type be that of religious austerity or the more appealing form of philanthropy. Real devotional life, whatever other marks it may have, will include unfeigned humility, a consistent prayer life, and the spirit of self-

sacrifice; and these will of necessity be rooted in sincere love of God. In what we do and say there may be many of the outward marks of the devotional spirit, but without a firm realization of a personal life in God we must inevitably limp through the forms of devotional expression, and the devotional output will be either a form of piety or a luxury of feeling, rather than the irresistible compulsion of the soul.

It must not be thought that all devotional life can realize the standard which has been described, or that it must answer in every case to a particular type. The expression of the devotional life will be determined by the characteristics of the generation, and it will be modified by individual factors and by the circumstances of the time. It would be impossible to understand the emotional enthusiasms of Asbury's day if we should insist upon measuring the devotional life by the highly socialized ideal of Christianity which prevails now. Neither must we expect to find in any man, as he is interpreted by his friends and his opponents, a perfect embodiment of an idealized standard of devotional life. All men are of the earth earthy, both in their deeds and in their dealings with others. True devotional life will always represent the outgoing of the individual soul toward God. It may be manifest in many ways and it may have many marks of imperfection, but if it represents the earnest seeking of the soul for God it will none the less be true devotion.

The devotional life of Asbury has been accepted as a matter of fact and comparatively small attention has been given it in any work dealing with his career. This has not been because he was in any sense lacking in this important element of religious leadership, but

because his preëminence in the founding and development of the Methodist Church pointed at once to his ecclesiastical statesmanship as the explanation of his greatness. It may be true, as some assert, that he displayed great reticence as to his own spiritual attainments, and that is probably to his credit; but of one thing there can be no doubt—his hunger for God and his desire for holiness of life are burned into every page of his Journal. The urge that kept him for forty-five years on the road, and his genius for founding and building a church, cannot be accounted for except by his consuming devotional passion—the expression of the spiritual fire that burned in his own soul.

When all the facts are considered, it is perfectly natural that he should have developed a devotional spirit of the type and the intensity that he exhibited. The disconsolate sorrow of his mother, which drove her to the Scriptures for comfort, and her own intense devotional reaction came at a time when his mind would be most impressed by such an influence. In addition to this, he was brought up in the atmosphere of the greatest revival that ever swept any land in the history of the Christian church, and his soul was nourished upon a devotional literature that for purity and lofty passion has never been surpassed—*Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, *Imitation of Christ*, and the sermons and hymns of the Wesleys. He was a product of the reaction against a spiritual deadness which had come to be little less than a national disgrace. What more natural than that his very being should have become a living protest against the scandal of his age, and that his soul should have been fired with a passion for holy living?

Ezekiel Cooper says: "He appeared to have nothing to do with the things of the world, only as they promoted the cause of God."<sup>1</sup> It is needless to say that a devotional life founded upon such a profound experience, and supported by such literature as Asbury had absorbed, was in no sense a passing phase that would be dependent upon the physical enthusiasms of youth for its continuance. No martyr that ever went to the stake had a surer confidence in God than he. Indeed, he suffered martyrdom in flesh and spirit for the work to which he devoted his life, and he came down to the end of the way with a singleness of purpose like that with which he began.

Asbury's devotional life had its ecstatic moments, and always a distinctly spiritual tone; but that does not mean that pietism dominated his convictions. Rankin was his superior in office, but Asbury did not hesitate to oppose him when he felt that he was wrong in his administrative policy. He was always loyal to Mr. Wesley, but when he was convinced that his domination of the American church was liable to result in permanent hurt to the cause, he promptly cast his influence on the side of the greater interest. He opposed with Christian spirit and determination the proponents of ordination in the sacramental controversy; he withstood James O'Kelly in a contest which brought wrath upon his own head; and in the same cause he withstood Nicholas Snethen and Jesse Lee. Beneath the superficial markings, his devotional life had the deep-running currents of a great purpose and a great ideal.

Asbury's devotional life was not wanting in the

<sup>1</sup> Cooper, *Funeral Sermon*, p. III.

marks of distinct piety. His prayer life was one of the distinguishing characteristics of his ministry. St. Jerome in his cloister under the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was not more a man of prayer than was this bishop of the New World. He was constantly in the saddle, but he found time to pray in private three hours every day. When he could have no privacy in the cabin homes where he was entertained, he went into the woods, sometimes in the cold and rain, and there he agonized with God alone. He prayed in the homes, and even in the taverns where he stopped. One of the most beautiful resolves ever uttered was expressed by Asbury in the words, "Every family shall know me by prayer"; and no man ever came nearer to living up to such a purpose than did he. Busy as he was and burdened as he was, he found time to cultivate every member of the homes where he stopped.

Ira Ellis, in a letter of recollections, relates an incident in one of the Conferences, where many of the preachers had not been paid and their dissatisfaction was not concealed. Asbury, without either promise or argument, said "LET US PRAY." Then followed the prayer: "Lord, we are in thy hands and in thy work. Thou knowest what is best for us and for thy work; whether plenty or poverty. The hearts of all men are in thy hands. If it is best for us and for thy church that we should be cramped and straitened, let the people's hands and hearts be closed: If it is better for us; for the church,—and more to thy glory that we should abound in the comforts of life; do thou dispose the hearts of those we serve to give accordingly: and may we learn to be content whether we abound, or



suffer need.”<sup>2</sup> It does not have to be said that the effect of such a prayer was overwhelming.

Before he ever came to America Asbury's mind swept the field of religious opportunity and need, and after he came there was never a day when the whole American enterprise was not charted upon his soul. Stevens says: “The appeals from the American Methodists had reached him in his rural circuits, for he had never left his ministerial work to attend the Annual Conference. Two months before the session of 1771 his mind had been impressed with the thought that America was his destined field of labor. He saw in the New World a befitting sphere for his apostolic aspirations.”<sup>3</sup> Even after he had begun in America, when it seemed that the arbitrary rule of Thomas Rankin would defeat his purpose, he thinks of Gibraltar and Antigua as possible fields for the investment of the devotional passion that he could not suppress. And we are told that in his prayers he swept the whole horizon of Christian enterprise and opportunity with a minuteness, an understanding, and a greatness of heart which thrilled and inspired those who heard.

Freeborn Garretson said of him, “He was great in prayer.” If every spot which he consecrated by prayer were marked, the real story of his prayer life would stand out in a surprising way. As someone has beautifully and truthfully said: “When the chariot of God bore him home he left to American Methodism, and to America as well, the legacy of his prayers.”

Another outstanding characteristic of Asbury's devotional life was his absolute acceptance of the Scriptures

<sup>2</sup> Drew MSS.

<sup>3</sup> Stevens, *The Centenary of American Methodism*, p. 93.

To the Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. 20  
Philadelphia

Gentlemen,

I desire to you individually, and through you to some  
degree collectively in the United States my thanks for the warm  
affection, and the expressions of joy, offered in their behalf, on my late  
approach. It has this to me evidence to encourage, to exhort, to  
the purity of my inclinations for promoting the happiness, & mankind,  
as well as the sincerity of my desire to contribute whatever may be  
in my power towards the propagation of the civil and religious  
liberties of the American People. In pursuing this line of conduct,  
there is the assistance of some mercies, not altogether to assist, but  
the confidence which you have been pleased to repose in me.

I always regard as satisfaction when I find a concurrence in  
principle and practice between all conscientious men in acknow-  
-ledgements of homage to the great Governor of the Universe, and in  
propositions of support to a just and civil government. After reasoning  
that must the people of these dominions who demand the same  
as good citizens, will have occasion to be convinced that I have  
been to prove a faithful and impartial relation of genuine and  
religion. I must inform you in particular that I have in the brief  
part the prompt was made of presenting your papers at the House  
of Grace, to me, and that I have suffered the same treatment  
on yourselves and your religious community.

G. Washington

From Washington Papers in the Library of Congress.

REPLY OF PRESIDENT WASHINGTON TO THE RESOLUTIONS  
OF THE NEW YORK CONFERENCE





as sufficient for all his spiritual requirements. He records his purpose to read other books less, and the Scriptures more; and his companions in travel assert that his familiarity with the Book was such that he could choose instantly a text exactly suited to any situation that might arise. He could do this, not through any intuition, but because he rose before five o'clock in the morning to study his Bible. He writes one day that he had finished reading his Bible through in about four months. At the close of an ordination service in Albany, New York, he is said to have raised the Bible in his hands and said: "This is the minister's battle-ax; this is his sword; take this therefore, and conquer." <sup>4</sup>

It does not seem, however, that his devotion to the Bible was in any sense a fetish. Such an interpretation is made impossible by the way he toiled over the Hebrew, the Greek, and the Latin; for all his study was that he might get at the mind of those who wrote, and that he might know the message of God as it was recorded in the sacred text. The sermon outlines which he wrote down in his Journal were enriched by his own interpretations of the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin texts. In the parts of the Journal which he edited for publication he erased the greater number of these critical comments, but they were there. He was not concerned with accepted interpretations so much as he was concerned to know the mind of God. This does not mean at all that he repudiated the findings of those who had gone before him, but that he verified them for himself. In this particular of his devotional life, he set as noble an example for the ministry of the church of his day

<sup>4</sup> Atkinson, *Centennial History of American Methodism*, p. 258.

as was ever set by any man. One can easily believe that no single fact contributed more to the devotional spirit and purpose of his ministry than did this determination to know what God really meant to teach in the Scriptures.

The full measure of the devotional life of Asbury will not be known until we know something of his consecration to the cause of Christ in the field which he chose for his own. We know the story of his long and weary journeys, and we have been told that he asked of no preacher a service in which he did not lead the way; but in everything that he did his mind was set upon the homes and hearts of the people in the wilderness. It is true that he prophesied that the Methodists would become a great and wealthy people, but his aspiration was not that the people might be great, but that they might know Christ and love him with the whole heart. His confidence in the sufficiency of Christ for every need of the people was voiced in one of the finest sentences that ever found place in the devotional literature of the world: "Our cabins are courts when Jesus is there." In the faith of that sentence Francis Asbury lived and wrought his whole life through.

His devotion to duty knew no intermission, his attention was never diverted from his chief responsibility, and his introspection was merciless. When he had been a bishop for ten years, we find him chiding himself for the hard things he had thought and said about those who opposed him. He was impatient with the man who delayed for a moment after his task was assigned. In his Journal he pours out the feelings and impulses of the moment, but often without giving a

clue to either the offender or the offense, and without indicating his own deep and firm resolves. Always and in all things he bears the stamp of a man whose face was set toward God.

Introspective, serious, self-denying Asbury! One shudders to think of what would have happened if he had ridden out into a Virginia clearing and seen two of his preachers playing chess in front of a settler's cabin. Suppose he had happened in unexpectedly at General Russell's one night when he was tired and wet, and had found Nicholas Snethen and Henry Boehm in a game of rook with their hosts. Imagine, if you can, the scene at Cambridge, if he had found Jesse Lee in a contest for the New England gold championship. Let the curtain fall!

One of his biographers says: "The explanation of the whole is that Francis Asbury ever felt life in its visible and revealed relations to be *real*, and ever lived for a purpose and aim—an aim and purpose which were never absent from his consciousness; which gained over him increasing governing power; which gave shape and character to his thoughts, tone to his feelings, a right direction and a true force to his exertions; which were a well of life within him springing up continually and renewing his sanctified energies day by day." <sup>5</sup> To the same purpose Abel Stevens writes: "May we not affirm, that if 'all bishops and other clergy' were of like character with this old hero, the world would witness a stirring spectacle? With a ministry of such spirits the Christianization of the race would be the work of but one or two generations. Such a ministry, warring with the mighty agencies of

<sup>5</sup> Briggs, *Francis Asbury*, p. 277.

evil in our world, would present the sublime scene of Milton's battle with the angels." ° These are indeed strong words, but who will say that they are not true as applied to the devotional life of Francis Asbury?

° Stevens, in *Knickerbocker Magazine*, Vol. LIII, p. 82.

CHAPTER XI  
THEOLOGICAL POSITION

“My study of divinity is Wesley’s sermons—I read some of them to-day.”

“There is life amongst some of the Methodists, and they will grow because they preach growing doctrines.”

—*Asbury’s Journal*

“The ideals and doctrines of Methodism were embodied and proclaimed by him (Asbury) as by no other preacher except Wesley himself.”

—CADMAN, *Three Religious Leaders of Oxford*

“I reached my circuit in Kent, and preached on my favourite subject: ‘This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.’”

—*Asbury’s Journal*

“He seldom meddled with controversy or metaphysics. He discussed the fundamental doctrines of evangelical religion with clear exposition and forcible logic.”

—LARRABEE, *Asbury and His Coadjutors*

“With us, as in the days of Asbury, Methodism is a divine antagonism to sin, an eternal protest against the reign of evil, a sanctified impatience for the conquest of the nations, an organizer.”

—GALLOWAY, *Great Men and Great Movements*



## CHAPTER XI

### THEOLOGICAL POSITION

THE approach to Asbury's theological position is historical rather than critical. It may be admitted frankly that he made no contribution to the theological literature of his day beyond the meager outlines of his sermons, which we find in his *Journal*, and contributed practically nothing to the doctrinal foundation of the Methodist Church in America. But it was not necessary that he should do so, for he came to America as the representative of a religious purpose and ideal which were not primarily theological. His main purpose was to proclaim a message, the selfsame purpose for which he had left his home land.

Asbury and the pioneer preachers who labored with him were more concerned for the evangelization of the people than for anything else, and the same was true of the whole Wesleyan movement. It has been said that Methodism is really "a restatement of the great fundamental truths of the gospel," and that Mr. Wesley simply arranged the vital spiritual teachings of his day to fit his evangelistic purpose and ideal. It is certain that Wesleyan theology is not an underived and original system in the sense that is true of the creed of the Church of England, or even of the "deterministic scheme" of John Calvin. Mr. Wesley was a

man of considerable intellectual independence, but neither his theological system nor his literary productions would seem to justify, except in a relative sense, our rating him as an original thinker. He adapted the teachings of the Church of England for his own purposes, as he adapted much of the literature that went out from the Methodist press of England. In this connection it should be said again that Mr. Wesley's concern, the concern out of which the Methodist Church originated, was not theological, but evangelical. He assembled statements of truth and arrayed them against an age whose life was a practical denial of every spiritual implication of Christian belief.

The fact that the purpose of Mr. Wesley and the Methodists was wholly evangelistic, and did not remotely contemplate the organization of a new ecclesiastical body, had the effect of relieving them of responsibility for offering an original and competitive system of teaching. The differentiation which they sought was spiritual, not theological or intellectual. In the very nature of the case their preaching took that direction, and those who were brought up under its influence would necessarily have their interests and beliefs fixed by the paramount emphasis.

Under this evangelistic impulse and ideal Francis Asbury was brought up. It has been pointed out already that his itinerant experiences in England had brought him into contact with the spiritual fervor of John Bunyan. He was thoroughly grounded in the evangelism of the Wesleys and brought to America the passion out of which Methodism originated. As a theologian, some would dismiss Asbury with a wave of the hand, but in a system of teaching where indi-

viduality counted for so much this does not seem to be quite just. Wesley fashioned a theological system out of the material which the masters had produced. Asbury translated that system into Western thinking, transmitted it without diminution of its distinctive principle or loss of its practical value, and made it live in the experience of the men and women of the New World. He lacked the educational culture of Wesley, but through the passion and the determination of his soul he made a distinct contribution to the evangelistic aim of the Wesleyan movement.

It is often insisted that Asbury was theologically dependent; but does such an assumption really explain anything? No reasonable person can deny Asbury's independence of spirit. It stood out in his relations with both Dr. Coke and Mr. Wesley, and it marked every act of his episcopal career. In the unfinished address to the General Conference, to which reference has already been made, he expressed the belief that Mr. Wesley was led "into seeming or real inconsistencies," because he followed authorities rather than the simple values of his own experience; and he goes on to say that he thinks "that reformers in all ages have been exceedingly shackled by human authorities" which had their validity in the conditions out of which they originated. It is needless to say that such a theory could not be pressed too far, nor could it be made a matter of general practice in assigning value to Christian literature; but it shows Asbury's unwillingness to accept anything as true which had not passed through the alembic of his own soul. Even the great learning of Dr. Joseph Benson did not embarrass him, for he writes him concerning the derivation of the term

“bishop”: “It is very near to a perfect German word, in both consonants and vowels, admitting the German pronunciation, and the English pronunciation to differ. Bischoft, the chief minister.” To return to his demand for election before he would accept ordination as a bishop, it seems that he had other reason than that of establishing the ecclesiastical independence of the American church. His letter to Dr. Benson indicates that he was seeking to meet the requirements of an apostolic episcopacy, according to the custom and usage of the early church.<sup>1</sup>

Enough has been said to show that, whatever he accepted from Mr. Wesley and those who collaborated with him in working out the Wesleyan system, he accepted because it was approved by his own soul's experience, and not because it had the approval of Mr. Wesley. The course and insistence of Asbury had much to do with the organization of the American church and of fixing the status of Wesleyan theology. In this very important sense Asbury was one of the collaborators with Mr. Wesley in the making of the Wesleyan system.

Asbury was a Wesleyan because he found in its teachings that which interpreted his own experience, and for that reason he accepted it and preached it with unquestioning loyalty. In common with the Methodist folk of his day, he was interested in great dogmas only as means to the production of a great experience of God in the soul. When the soul of Asbury was dominated by such a definite and practical purpose as that, it is not to be expected that he would interest himself much in the phraseology of creeds and dogmas.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix.

His sermon outlines show that he concerned himself with the fundamental truths which have to do with the salvation of men, and that he studied to make those truths practical and effective. At the close of one of his Conferences in 1792, he conducted a sort of institute with his preachers. The questions proposed reveal his intense spiritual purpose: "1. How are we to deal with sinners? 2. How should we treat mourners? 3. Which way should we address hypocrites? 4. How can we deal with backsliders? 5. What is the best for believers?"<sup>2</sup> These five questions contain the whole of the Methodist emphasis and interpret the mind of Asbury as well.

From what has just been said, one can readily understand that Asbury would not be greatly interested in speculative questions; and when his mind did turn to such consideration, the basis was usually practical—a problem with which he was wrestling. Among the themes which sometimes led him into such a train of thought were Calvinism, the episcopacy, and the all-absorbing subject of slavery. Once, when he was shut in on account of protracted illness, we find him revolving in his mind the question as to why God condoned polygamy and slavery in the time of Moses and condemns them now.<sup>3</sup> A few other instances of speculative questions might be cited; but, on the whole, it must appear from what has been said that the field marshal of American Methodism had but one business—to win the people to Christ.

In his labors Asbury rang true to the doctrinal emphasis of the Wesleyan movement. He taught that sin is both real and universal, and he believed firmly

<sup>2</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. II, p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 365.



in the personality of the devil. He records that, once while he was praying in the congregation, a large limb fell among the people; and he thinks it might have been a trick of the devil to kill a man who was to speak after him with great power.<sup>4</sup> On another occasion he says: "I believe Satan is doing all he can to discredit the work of God that is carried on through our instrumentality, because he envies our success."<sup>5</sup> It is clear that in all his contests with evil he had a vivid consciousness of the personality of Satan.

The doctrines which made up Asbury's system of theology were just the things which had to do with religious experience and the development of the Methodist ideal of holy living. His Journal indicates that he gave consistent emphasis to repentance, justification, regeneration, and the doctrine of Christian assurance. Personal assurance was one of the distinctive doctrines preached by the early Methodists, and it made a tremendous appeal to devout souls who hungered for a conscious experience of divine things. Asbury believed devoutly in sanctification as it was taught by Mr. Wesley. He does not appear to have professed it as his own experience, with that dogmatic and shallow certainty which we sometimes encounter among those who make holiness a fetish; but he certainly held it to be the end of the finished work of redemption and regarded it as a most effective religious appeal. He stood for the doctrine and preaching of holiness of heart and pronounced it the best antidote against the poison of antinomianism.<sup>6</sup>

As a means to all ends that have to do with human

<sup>4</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 474.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 418.      <sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 441.

well-being, Asbury believed devoutly in prayer. It was the one spiritual exercise by which he lived. To take out of his Journal the instances in which he records his recourse to prayer would materially reduce its volume. He complains more of being deprived of the privilege of prayer than of the physical discomforts of the cabin homes where he lodged, or the excessive labor of travel. Once, when the physicians had abandoned hope for the recovery of a certain person, he says: "We had recourse to that old-fashioned remedy, prayer; and had reason to believe the Lord in mercy heard us."<sup>7</sup> Yet again, he tells us that, when he and his associates had failed to effect a reconciliation of the Southern preachers by diplomatic exchanges at Manakintown, the refractory brethren were brought to agreement while he prayed as with a broken heart.<sup>8</sup>

Pronounced as he was in his opinions, Asbury had no use for controversy, either for himself or for others. He gave it as his belief that controversy should be avoided, because the Methodists had better work to do and because where sharp debate is had wrong tempers are indulged in on both sides.<sup>9</sup> He says, too, that many mistake the spirit of controversy for the spirit of true religion, while others dispute away what little religion they have.<sup>10</sup> What bitter heartaches and spiritual losses might have been avoided if American Christianity had listened to the wise counsel of this Methodist prophet!

It is true, perhaps, that Francis Asbury blazed no new pathway for religious thinking, but it is not true that he was a servile trailer, even of so great a man

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 367.

<sup>9</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. II, p. 209.

<sup>10</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 174.



as Mr. Wesley. He was a man of stable and independent convictions, and this could not have been so if he had been simply an echo of borrowed ideas. He became mighty in his leadership of American Methodism because Wesleyan teachings coincided with his own experience, and he gave them soul and vitality through his own personality. For him, loyalty to the teachings of Mr. Wesley meant no more than that he set the interests of the heart and soul of man above all substitutes for vital godliness; and this was true whether the substitutes were traditional, formal, or philosophical. By every just and reasonable token he was a theological leader in his own right.

CHAPTER XII  
AS A PREACHER

"Lord, keep me from all superfluity of dress, and from preaching empty stuff to please the ear, instead of changing the heart."

—*Asbury's Journal*

"His (Asbury's) own pulpit deliverances must have been in the outset somewhat wanting in their range of thought. But they never lacked the note of earnestness. He knew that the supreme end of preaching is to call men to repentance and faith, and that any lower end than this is unworthy of the chosen servant of God."

—BISHOP HOSS, in *The Christian Advocate*

"His (Asbury's) attitude in the pulpit was graceful, dignified, and solemn; his voice full and commanding; his enunciation clear and distinct; and sometimes a sudden burst of eloquence would break forth in a manner which spoke a soul full of God, and like a mountain torrent swept all before it."

—BANGS, *History of the M. E. Church*

"His (Asbury's) language was good, his manner agreeable, his matter excellent, and his voice melodious. But his eloquence did not usually consist in the splendor of pompous language, nor the artificial flowers of refined and polite oratory, but in the grandeur of the sentiments, and the sublimity of the divine truths uttered."

—COOPER, *Funeral Sermon*

## CHAPTER XII

### AS A PREACHER

A DISCUSSION of homiletic standards and of the rules for ministerial classification has no place in this study except as a means of reaching a conclusion regarding the place Asbury should have as a preacher. It is solely for this purpose that attention is given to the practical facts relating to preaching and to the standards for rating sermonic literature.

The most difficult person to analyze is a real preacher, and the most difficult production to criticize is the sermon. It is true that we have our canons of style and our conventional rules for sermon development and delivery; but in the very nature of the case these have to do almost wholly with the superficial aspects of the preacher as a public performer and with the sermon as a piece of literature. Back of the public performer is a prophetic element, a preacher-soul, which constitutes the real preacher; and this preacher-soul offers as deadly defiance to the approaches of profane thought as the Ark of the Covenant offered to profane hands. The preacher is the unaccountable man of all the ages, and for the reason that the impartation of the Divine purpose to him involves a factor as mysterious and impenetrable as the being of God himself. Pulpit effort, therefore, may have very little

necessary connection with style, diction, or other marks of literary excellence; or it may have the grace and the approved characteristics of the essay. But it is a sermon only when it is saturated with the soul of God's prophet, and that quality cannot be transferred to the printed page or be measured by homiletic micrometers.

Aside from the Divine element, the personality of the preacher himself introduces an element of unending surprise. Every true preacher is himself a type, and so many variables enter into the problem that there can be no such thing as reducing the factors to a constant common denominator. And when the preacher is himself, plus the cultural ideal of his day, plus the predominant interest of the time, and plus a particular end to be accomplished, the points for comparison and contrast are too few and unimportant to furnish a sound and certain basis for rigid rules of interpretation.

It is said that nature is of infinite variety. Every leaf of the oak is a unit, but the life in the oak is a bond that types them all. So preachers may differ widely in their individuality and in the circumstances and problems to which they must address themselves; but the changeless purpose and power of God are abiding facts which have coördinated these individual ministries and secured the moral and spiritual uniformity of Christian history, and the same power and purpose have glorified the personality of the preacher in every case. It is no easy task, therefore, to assign positive values to the gifts of an individual preacher.

It does not seem an exaggeration to say that the most wretched abuse of the word "great" is in connection with preachers and preaching. Its use in this connection assumes a finality of conclusion in matters whose

full adjudication must wait for the Day of Judgment. One preacher may have a pleasing personality, another an elegant style, and still another an assiduous devotion to his task; and all of them fit admirably and effectively into their day of opportunity as heralds of the cross and as preachers of righteousness. The first and great question to be considered in estimating the place of a preacher is as to how well he fulfills the need of his day in the supreme function of preacher and prophet of Christian truth. It is not a question of models or types, but it is a question of evangelistic effectiveness. What else can be the use of the preacher and preaching!

Dr. Tipple thinks that the glory of the Methodist ministry in pioneer days was that members of it were not made after a common pattern and that they "were individual almost to uniqueness." An eminent teacher of church history thinks that there was what amounted to almost "a conspiracy of silence with reference to the Methodist pulpit." Whatever may be the explanation, it is certain that the Methodist pulpit has not received the recognition which the achievements of the Methodist Church justify.

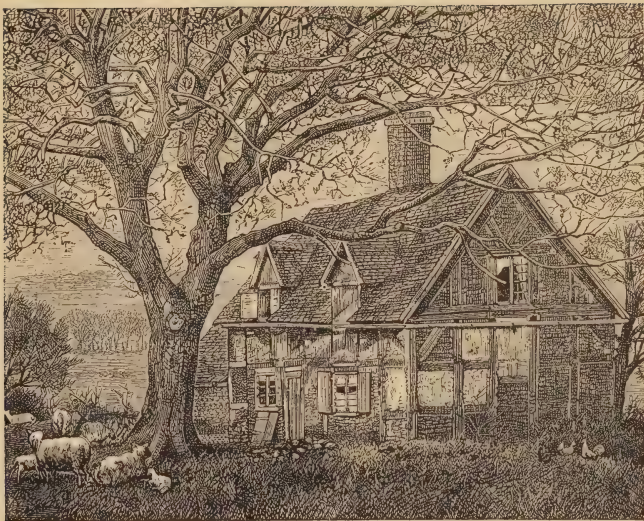
Francis Asbury, as a preacher, has received such insignificant notice as almost to eliminate him from consideration as one of God's prophets. It is given out that he was not a "great preacher," and that settles the question with the average reader of ecclesiastical biography, who then turns elsewhere to find his paragon of the pulpit, and sometimes, it may be, adopts a *voice* minus the *prophet*. No reputable work on preaching neglects to mention Mr. Wesley, and that is as it should be; but in a half-dozen of the latest and best-

known works on preachers and preaching the name of Francis Asbury is not once mentioned. Jonathan Edwards, Finney, Channing, Brooks, Bushnell, and many others are named, and one would be unwilling to challenge the justice of admitting these names to consideration; but what did any one of them, or even all of them together, do that deserves to be ranked with the evangelistic labors and success of Francis Asbury? Surely our test of preachers and preaching is no longer the practical rule of Jesus: "By their fruits ye shall know them."

No one would insist that Asbury, measured by conventional standards, was a "great preacher." Many of his contemporaries were his superiors in theological expertness, culture, eloquence, and many other commonly accepted marks of good preaching. Jesse Lee says that he was an "excellent preacher"; Nathan Bangs says he was "singularly imposing"; Joseph Travis, of Tennessee, asserts that he had a chaste and plain style, and that he was not redundant; and Joshua Marsden, of the Wesleyan connection, considered him dignified, eloquent, and impressive. But who would look for a pulpit stylist in a man who endured the toils of Francis Asbury? What use had this man of the frontiers for the elegant courtliness of a New England drawing room? His mission, like that of John the Baptist, was to be a voice in the wilderness. His preaching was necessarily extempore, and he sometimes suffered lapses of memory which were humiliating to him; but he was always pointed and practical, and he was so simple that the most illiterate backwoodsman knew what he meant.

Asbury's sermon outlines show that he made no effort to appear profound. He chose plain texts which





MANWOOD COTTAGE, WHERE ASBURY PREACHED HIS FIRST SERMON

"The first occasion of his conducting a public service in this capacity, or perhaps rather in the usual way of *trial* . . . was at Manwood's Cottage at Bromwich."—BRIGGS, *Bishop Asbury*.



he interpreted in a direct, practical, and evangelistic manner. Of the more than two hundred outlines to be found in his Journal, by far the greater number of them are distinctly evangelistic appeals. On the text, "Lord, are there few that be saved?" his outline is: "First, showed, What we are to be saved from. 2. How we are saved. 3. Why there are few. No open sinner can be in a state of salvation; no formalist, violent sectarian, having only opinions and modes of religion; no hypocrites or backsliders; no, nor those who are only seekers."<sup>1</sup> On Repentance his outline is: "I. The nature of repentance—the whole of religion. II. The universality of repentance—all orders, stations, characters must *repent*. III. The possibility of, and the provision made for repentance—the gift of Christ—the death of Christ—the agency of the Spirit—the preaching of the Gospel—the means of grace. IV. Necessity of repentance—from the considerations of the fall and our own actual transgressions, a future state and general judgment. V. The time for repentance—*now*—this Gospel day of grace."<sup>2</sup> These two outlines are sufficient evidence of his insistent evangelism.

These evangelistic exhortations were not intended to produce an emotional exhilaration so much as they were designed to enforce the whole ethical implication of the experience of redemption. He preached upon Micah vi. 6-8, and he says: "I endeavoured to show, First, that it is still the voice of many, 'Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, to enjoy his favour and presence, and bow myself before the high God?' that

<sup>1</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 339.

<sup>2</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 215.

is, worship him acceptably, as though they would give all they have in the world, no sacrifice should be too great; but men are often great in promise, but defective in performance; they promise much and do little. He hath showed thee, O man! what is good—that is, true religion; the blessed effects and fruit of it—do justly and walk humbly with thy God; see Deut. x. 12; Hosea xii. 6. First, Do justly according to human laws, and the claims and rights of men with men, as it respects continents, kingdoms, or families. Second, Do justice as it concerns the laws of God—as the second table is a claim of justice to obey parents, and not to take men's lives nor their wives; to bear a true witness. Third, Do justly, according to the commandment of Christ, Matt. vii. 12. 'Love mercy,' as it extends to the souls and bodies of men; this requires more than to do justly to them: 'walk humbly with thy God'—feel thy total poverty and universal dependence upon God for all things, spiritual and temporal." <sup>3</sup> In another outline which includes a division on "Clean hands" he says: "Clean hands, clean hearts; by renouncing oppression of all kinds, civil, sacred, and domestic—every act of injustice, all bribery, all sinful practices."

Some of these outlines seem to reflect his administrative problems. In Virginia he preached on I Peter ii. 1, 2. The sermon is clearly aimed at the O'Kelly schismatics, and it would be difficult to imagine a more severe arraignment than is to be found in his contrast of their activities with the spirit and activity of babes: "Babes; not giving them strong food or medicines: babes; strangers to malice by want of understanding

<sup>3</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. II, p. 405.

and not having a capacity for guile; strangers to hypocrisy; no ideas of envy, not having speech to speak evil.”<sup>4</sup>

There was often a majestic simplicity in Asbury's exposition of the Scripture. Such was the case in his outline on the text, “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.” “In my introduction I showed that the being converted here mentioned, is the same word which in other places is translated, ‘born again’; answering to the new creation and resurrection. In this discourse I took occasion to show the miserable state of the unconverted, both present and future, and the exercises that converted souls do, and must pass through;—that they must be made as little children, wholly dependent on God; possessing meekness of spirit, and freed from the guilt, power, and nature of sin.”<sup>5</sup> The introduction might not stand critical examination, but the presentation as a whole certainly meets the requirements of effective preaching.

In some instances Asbury exhibits an oratorical style. Take, for instance, his sermon: “‘They shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob,’ &c. 1. A Scriptural view of the kingdom of heaven. 2. The subjects or citizens thereof. 3. Sit down with Abraham, famous for faith; Isaac, for justice, truth, meditation, and walking with God; and Jacob, mighty in prayer.”<sup>6</sup> It is easy to understand the oratorical opportunity of such a climax as is here presented.

Asbury's sermon outlines reveal a high order of

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 357.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

spiritual comprehension and Biblical insight, and he exhibits the conscience of a student in that he seeks to establish his interpretations in the passage of Scripture from which he preaches. An instance of the critical examination of names occurring in the Hebrew is found in his study of Job xvii. 9: " 'The righteous also shall hold on his way; and he that hath clean hands shall be stronger and stronger.' After tracing the origin of the land of *Uz*, as to be seen in the genealogy of *Nahor*, his son *Huz*; taking H as a prefix in Hebrew—as an article, the *Uz*. In the genealogy of Esau we find Job's friends as princes and pious philosophers. This is the presumption; Jobab the father of Job, or Job *ab*, i.e. father of grief, according to the Hebrew word." <sup>7</sup> In the study of Galatians iv. 16, he makes use of the historic setting: "I observed, how great was the affection between the Christian societies in ancient Galatia and St. Paul, until the Judaizing teachers came in among them. The province of Galatia was in Lesser Asia; and when the ancient Gauls, or Galatae, wanted to extend their province, they penetrated through Italy and Greece, and went into Asia, and pillaged the country as far south as Babylon: but one hundred and twenty thousand being defeated by a handful of Jews; and Attalus, king of Pergamus, having forced them from his territory, they settled here. Among these the Gospel was planted by St. Paul, Acts xvi. 6; who had but just left the country when the schism began by means of the teachers of the ceremonial law. In this Church there have been a great number of bishops, and councils, and Synods; but for near eight hundred years the tyranny of the Mohammedans, Saracens, and

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 381.



Turks, have almost exterminated the very name of Christianity.”<sup>8</sup>

Asbury had a remarkable faculty for choosing a text which exactly fitted his purpose, and for the most part he found his divisions in the obvious meaning of the text itself. He made large use of the epistles of St. Paul, as one would expect; but the surprising thing is that he made seemingly small use of the Gospels of St. Mark and St. John.

Few men ever responded more readily or more effectively to the atmosphere of an occasion than did Asbury; and this was true whether the circumstances were favorable or unfavorable. He is said to have preached to soldiers during Revolutionary days, when the situation was tense and strained, but he always delivered himself with a freedom and power that disarmed suspicion and sent them away to praise. The quickness of his reaction to a situation is shown by the way he turned to account storms, fires, pestilence, and other disasters.

On the other hand, it is doubtful if any man ever responded less effectively to a formal or conventional demand. The very consciousness of such an occasion seemed to deprive him of interest in the whole matter; and his speech seemed to be robbed of spontaneity by the very sense of obligation and the effort of preparation. When he had been a bishop for twenty-two years he writes: “*Christmas day* is the worst in the whole year on which to preach Christ; at least to me.”<sup>9</sup> There are other instances where he makes similar complaint. Student though he was, he records that the very preparation which he sometimes undertook was a definite handicap: “It seems strange, that sometimes, after much

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>9</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 122.



premeditation and devotion, I cannot express my thoughts with readiness and perspicuity; whereas at other times, proper sentences of Scripture and apt expressions occur without care or much thought.”<sup>10</sup> It seems clear that the unordered course of his ministry had developed in him mental habits which enabled him to respond to surprise with a power and effectiveness which he was not able to command in systematic attack.

Asbury himself was no unimportant factor in the appeals which he made from the pulpit. What his sermons were as they came hurtling from his passionate soul must be left largely to the imagination, and to the judgment based upon the tremendous effect which they produced in the lives of the people. Many bear testimony to the plainness of his style, but Ezekiel Cooper intimates that his force as a preacher lay in the grandeur of his sentiments rather than in any rhetorical effect. He spoke to the conscience more than to the mind. On occasions he swept the emotions of great audiences with the mighty passion that stirred in his own soul, and once in New England the people rose to their feet under the spell which he cast upon them. But when all has been said, the fact remains that the effectiveness of his pulpit ministrations probably owes more to his Christian character, his passionate fervor, and his faithful use of the Word of God, than to all the elements of style and delivery combined. He was certainly not concerned about the conventional matters of public discourse; the urgency of his message left him no choice as to methods of delivery. His preaching was not couched in placid phrases, the “empty stuff” which

<sup>10</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 212.

he feared, but was always an arraignment of sin and a call to live for God.

According to the books, he was deficient in style, and he wasted no time trying to satisfy critical standards. He seems also to have been wanting in imagination. Henry Boehm says that many preferred to hear "Black Harry," which seems to mean that Asbury had not the impassioned eloquence of the Negro race. One of the gripping things about his preaching was the surprising appropriateness of his texts, which made his discourse seem to burst forth out of the inspiration of the moment. There may have been times when his style of delivery was "dignified and impressive," but Asbury himself says that there were other times when his preaching was "systematical and dry"; and it is certain that there were times when he preached with great vehemence, so that the people came rushing from their homes to see what was happening. He had one supreme aim in every sermon that he preached, and for that reason his deliverances were charged with a moral earnestness born of his high spiritual purpose and always ended with a plea for action based upon God's judgment upon sin.

His profound appreciation of the simple but effective men associated with him in the itinerant ministry shows how thorough was his commitment to a style of preaching adapted to practical ends. He says: "The zealous conversations and prayers of Mr. Gough seem to move and melt the hearts of the people more than my preaching."<sup>11</sup> He mentions Joseph Cromwell as a man of unaffected simplicity, and adds that he could not read or write well, but that his words went through

<sup>11</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 192.

him, and that he was a man of whose preaching he never tired.<sup>12</sup> The deciding factor in his own ministry, and in his appreciation of the ministry of others, was unquestionably evangelism. He was sorry to see the fervent and effective Shadford leave America, and he could forget the eccentricities of Lorenzo Dow and Peter Cartwright because people were saved under their ministry.

Another thing showing Asbury's practical adaptation of the gospel to the situation was his keen appreciation of the American temperament. Rankin would have outlawed the revival spirit, but Asbury was quick to see in it an advantage that would more than offset all the possibilities of danger through the development of a fanatical enthusiasm. In exactly the same way he seized upon the camp meeting as a means of furthering his cause. These things were but means to an end, but they show his utter indifference to all regulation and style in preaching as against winning the people to Christ.

This brings us back to the question hinted at the opening of this chapter: What is preaching, and for whom is it intended? Is it an intellectual luxury, or is it really a part of God's method for reaching "every creature"? Asbury was plainly of that group of Christians who accept the terms of the "Great Commission," and he did not dare subtract from its inclusiveness. For him, style was incidental, culture was secondary, and all purely human contributions were important only in the degree that they helped to achieve results—the real test of a gospel ministry.

What St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians about every

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

man's work being revealed by fire is not more applicable to Christian character than it is a test of the abiding values of the ministry of preaching. The final credential of every ministry will be not that it was cast in a certain mold, but that it did effectively the one work that was before it. No one need fear to rest the preaching of Asbury upon that test, and there is no need to plead his constant illness as an apology for imaginary deficiencies in his preaching. As a preacher he was a man of power and a master of multitudes; and surely this is the fulfillment of the highest function of preaching.

Though more profound in his mastery of book learning, he was not a preacher of the brilliance of M'Kendree; but it was the poise and the persuasive eloquence of the patient and redoubtable Asbury that drew M'Kendree back from the O'Kelly defection, and saved his splendid ministry to the Methodist Church. It is a high tribute to the preaching ability of this pioneer that, as he rode into Fredericktown, Maryland, the church bells began to ring, calling the people to hear him preach.<sup>13</sup> There is no mistaking the impress of the preacher whom the people called by name as they passed him on every road from Maine to Georgia, and even beyond the crest of the Alleghenies. And it was not curiosity alone that brought out the people to hear "*this man that rambles throughout the United States.*"<sup>14</sup>

Francis Asbury, however, was more than just a preacher to the multitudes. Who can forget the names of Governors Van Cortlandt, Worthington, and Tiffin,

<sup>13</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 301.

<sup>14</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. II, p. 179.

Senator Taylor, and General Russell, whose wife was a sister of the immortal Patrick Henry? A ministry which could disarm a prejudice little less than violent, bring the man to Christ, and make him the lifelong and devoted friend of the preacher is truly a great ministry. There were at least two such cases in the ministry of Asbury—Harry Dorsey Gough and Richard Bassett. Bassett was so hostile to Methodist preachers that he demanded his horse that he might leave Judge White's home when he learned that Asbury was there. But this same unpretentious preacher brought Richard Bassett and his wife to Christ, and only death dissolved the beautiful friendship between them. On April 26, 1809, Asbury says: "My dear friends, Governor Bassett and his lady, came nearly forty miles to meet me"; and on August 8, 1813, his entry is: "Richard Bassett and wife, and sister Bruff, came forty miles to see me." Think of it! Forty miles on two separate occasions to see a man who was not a "great preacher"!

Again and again he found in Ohio and Kentucky the children of his sainted friends on the Atlantic seaboard, who brought joy to the melancholy soul of the old preacher as they told him of the affection of their parents for him, and reminded him that he had baptized them and dandled them upon his knees when they were children. It was their affectionate testimonial to the greatness of the preacher. Beautiful sermons may be popular; profound and learned expositions are not without value; but the preaching that chastens a corrupt world, protects its innocence, inspires its soul, and builds its faith, abides. Only the preaching that molds the lives of the people is "great."



Francis Asbury would hardly take rank with the brilliant and scintillating men whom we think of as "great preachers." He lacked the scholarship, the imagination, and the magnetic presence of our preacher idol. He was plain, simple, and direct in his style, and he preached to the hearts of his hearers out of the heart of God. He turned a flickering flame of evangelism into the mightiest church of the Western World. Too many preachers are ready to be tried by popular standards, but avoid the searching test of results and refuse to endure the sacrifices and toils of soul and body necessary for a permanent fame. As an apology for our softer speech, we hear, "The times have changed." So they have in a thousand ways; but, if by this we mean that human nature has changed, it is not true. Men may not be willing to accept crude and indiscriminate denunciation in good grace, but they will still hear the truth from a preacher whose life is on the altar.

Tried by the supreme test, Francis Asbury was a "great preacher." He may never be set up as a homiletic model, but in his absolute consecration to his one great task he will live as a noble example of apostolic spirit and zeal. His preaching may provide little inspiration for the man who would lay a "straight edge" on the processes of the Spirit of God; but his fame is made secure through the church which he caused to be a fact in every settlement in all America, and his spirit will continue to lead the triumphant hosts of Methodism in the ministry of salvation and sacrificial service.





CHAPTER XIII  
FOUNDER OF AMERICAN METHODISM

"He (Asbury) was the chief directive force in the Methodist societies before he became formally their head."

—MILEY, in *Harper's Magazine*

"No man can *ever* fill the niche of Asbury—he was, under God, the father of American Methodism."

—PAINE, *Life of M'Kendree*

"Barbara Heck, Philip Embury, Captain Webb, and others were the pioneers of American Methodism; Boardman and Pilmoor laid the foundations; but Francis Asbury was the master builder."

—CURNOCK, *John Wesley's Journal*

"In regard to the Church, it may be said no man ever lived who projected himself further into the future of all that pertains to her genius, government, and institutions than did Asbury."

—STRICKLAND, *The Pioneer Bishop*

"Asbury's pioneer instincts kept him in America, and made him, not Bishop Coke, the founder of American Methodism, the molder of our doctrines, discipline, and polity."

—BISHOP JOHN W. BASHFORD

"Though not the first, he was the chief founder of Methodism in the New World. The history of Christianity, since the apostolic age, affords not a more perfect example of ministerial and episcopal devotion than was presented in this great man's life."

—STEVENS, *History of Methodism*

## CHAPTER XIII

### FOUNDER OF AMERICAN METHODISM

THERE is no legitimate ground for questioning the providential factor in the founding of the Methodist Church in America. It is clear that Mr. Wesley had not the slightest intention of creating a separate ecclesiasticism when he organized the Societies in England. His purpose was to create in connection with the Church of England a spiritual fellowship for the vast throngs of unchurched people of that time. This desire naturally included the evangelistic program which formed so large a part of Methodist activity. After all these years of Methodist history, it is easy to point out the fact that the whole development was away from the Established Church; but at the time no one seemed to be conscious of the meaning of the movement started at Oxford by the Wesleys.

From the beginning the Societies were constituted largely of groups who had no common interest economically, politically, or socially with those who made up the Established Church. To be sure, they were baptized at its altars, but aside from that they found there no hospitality or other marks of Christian fellowship. Their interests and thinking were different; they lived apart, and the very growth of the Societies

was calculated to promote in them a sense of spiritual sufficiency outside the church. One does not understand how a man of Mr. Wesley's discernment could have failed to see the trend of the movement; but it certainly was not part of his plan to organize a new church, and he himself remained in the Established Church to the end of his days.

In America as in England there was still no thought of organizing a new church, but the case was different in every way from the English development. Except for the disappointing missionary venture in Georgia, Mr. Wesley had no personal contact with the New World. His connection with the beginning in America was through Barbara Heck, Philip Embury, and Robert Strawbridge, who had come in contact with the Methodists in England. It would not be just to deny Mr. Wesley a very honorable place in the beginnings of Methodism in the New World; but to accord him all the praise and honor would be a surrender to the romance of a great name rather than to interpret the facts as they really are.

In America every circumstance conspired to make certain an independent church. The ideals of the people, the nature of American settlement, the fewness and the unsatisfactory character of the Church of England clergy, and the ever-widening breach in the political relations with England, were facts which no human genius could fit into an English-made and English-controlled scheme of administration. In addition to all this, the rapid growth of the Societies in America contributed to the development of an ecclesiastical independence which put out of the question long-continued subservience to alien control.

Almost before the Wesleyan missionaries had become adjusted to the new situation and were settled to their task, the Revolutionary War broke out. The spirit of freedom and the settlement in which the war terminated effectually eliminated English control, and at the same time made certain the establishment of an independent church in both England and America. The American would no longer consent to follow a will-o'-the-wisp, as he had done in the undefined religious movement that had existed up to that time; nor would he endure an ecclesiastical relationship that had the effect of reducing preachers and people to a state of spiritual mendicancy. It is needless to add that war differences would not long prevent an inevitable reaction in British Methodism in favor of separate church organization.

As has been shown already, the controversy concerning the administration of the ordinances became almost irrepressible long before the Revolutionary conflict was ended. Whatever may have been Mr. Wesley's intention in the matter, in the year following the peace the American Societies received full ecclesiastical enfranchisement at his hands. The American church was set up with its own "superintendency" and its own ritual. Four years later, at the London Conference, we find Dr. Coke pleading *earnestly* and *vehemently* that "the whole Methodist Body should make a formal separation from the Church."<sup>1</sup> In this he is referring, of course, to the "Methodist Body" in England. Thus we see the American influence in determining the whole course of Methodist history.

The part of Francis Asbury in these determinative

<sup>1</sup> Cadman, *The Three Religious Leaders of Oxford*, p. 370.

events was not due to any designation by Mr. Wesley, or to official preference; but it was due to his Christian character, and to the fact that he possessed such ability and leadership as to mark him as a man of destiny. He was not the first Wesleyan missionary in America, and he did not always have the unqualified endorsement and support of Mr. Wesley. It is no disparagement of the character of the English founder of Methodism to say that he was not able to grasp the American reaction and to plan constructively for the development of the work. Great as Mr. Wesley was, the real advances toward stability and effectiveness in American administration were achieved largely through disregard of his will, a disregard which came about, for the most part, through a train of events, rather than as a bald repudiation of his commands, or open hostility to his will.

Asbury's tenure as Mr. Wesley's "assistant" was of short duration. He was supplanted by Rankin, and upon the simple but wholly irrational ground of seniority in the Wesleyan service. Despite Rankin's good intentions, there never was a moment when he was not a liability to the Methodist Societies; and in the crucial test of the Revolution, to have followed his lead would have meant the certain disintegration and the ultimate loss of the Methodist fold. In this necessitous hour it was Francis Asbury to whom the Methodist people turned for leadership and direction; and it was he who said: "It would be an eternal dishonor to the Methodists that we should all leave three thousand souls, who desire to commit themselves to our care; neither is it the part of a good shepherd to leave his flock in time of danger: Therefore, I am determined,



by the grace of God, not to leave them, let the consequence be what it may."<sup>2</sup>

The cautious mind of Mr. Wesley seems to have been unable to fathom the insistent demand of the American Societies for an ordained ministry, and for full freedom and power to provide for their people the symbols of their Christian profession. He never seemed to realize the tenseness of the situation until political changes made the continuance of his personal and absolute control impossible. The opposers of the Methodist movement used the ecclesiastical incapacity of the preachers with telling effect in taunting the people who sympathized with the Societies. In the course of the controversy, a large part of the ministry and the people came to the point where they were ready and even impatient to put overboard all ecclesiastical traditions and authorities, and to yield unconditionally to necessity. Asbury deals with this situation at length in his letter to Dr. Benson, and says they requested Mr. Wesley, from year to year, to give them an ordained ministry until they obtained it.<sup>3</sup> In the delicate and threatening evolution of this matter, the saving of the situation rested upon the Christian character, the energy, and the mental poise of Asbury. Indeed, it was already lost except for his determination and conviction.

When the fortunes of war settled the question as to the perpetuation of foreign control, and Mr. Wesley had taken the bold course of supplying the Americans with a ministry of their own, he did it with certain reservations which were more perceptible in after developments than in the act and instrument of estab-

<sup>2</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 160.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix.



lishment. This problem has been threshed over again and again in the discussion of Asbury's "assumption" of the title "bishop." Moore, in his biography of Mr. Wesley, says: "Mr. Wesley well knew the difference between the *office* and the *title*"; and in speaking of his instructions to Dr. Coke and his associates, adds: "With respect to the title of *Bishop*, I know that Mr. Wesley enjoined the doctor and his associates, and in the most solemn manner, that it should not be taken." <sup>4</sup> Mr. Wesley must have had more than a sentimental reason for such solemn and insistent injunction concerning so small a matter; and the fact that he became peeved, as well as the caustic letter to "My dear Frankie" after his name had been left off the American Minutes, leaves the impression that his feeling was deeper than could have been caused by offenses against sentiment.

William Myles speaks to this same point thus: "I would just remark, though Mr. Asbury was appointed a Superintendent by Mr. Wesley; yet he would not submit to be ordained, unless he could be voted in by the Conference: when it was put to a vote, he was unanimously chosen. . . . This is a striking proof of Mr. Asbury's prudence." <sup>5</sup> William Myles was one of Mr. Wesley's preachers in England. No act connected with the founding of Methodism in America shows more of penetrating insight, or is a better exhibition of sanctified common sense, than Asbury's refusal to be Mr. Wesley's episcopal deputy. In the choice of that moment he turned aside a train of ills that would have resulted in the crippling, if not the ruin, of the American church. It was not the result of a council, but it

<sup>4</sup> Moore, *Life of Wesley*, Vol. II, pp. 228, 229.

<sup>5</sup> Myles, *History of the Methodists* (London, 1813), p. 163.

was the spontaneous decision of a man who realized that both he and the church to which he had given himself were standing at the parting of the ways.

The very fact that Mr. Wesley sought to go beyond anything that was ever intended by the fine courtesy of the American Conference in its confession of loyalty to him, and sought to appoint other superintendents, shows the wisdom of Asbury in laying the foundation for the absolute independence of the American church, and had he done otherwise, he would have displayed less capacity as a leader or been guilty of a betrayal of the Methodist people. This statement must not be taken as an unkind criticism of Mr. Wesley, for we must allow for the fact that not only was he extremely old, but he was not an American, and hence could not realize that the Methodists on this side were not one in interest and sentiment with the Methodists of England.

Asbury was placed in a difficult position by the seniority of Dr. Coke, who was a good man and a great missionary pioneer, but utterly lacking in the ability, firmness, and insight required for administration in the American field. When the church had been organized for thirteen years, we find Asbury recording in his Journal: "I am more than ever convinced of the propriety of the attempts I have made to bring forward Episcopal men:—First, from the uncertain state of my health; Secondly, from a regard to the union and good order of the American body, and the state of the European connexion. I am sensibly assured the Americans ought to act as if they expected to lose me every day, and had no dependence on Dr. Coke; taking prudent care not to place themselves under the con-

trolling influence of British Methodists.”<sup>6</sup> Many other instances might be cited, but these words are too plain and direct to leave room for question as to the mind or the problem of Asbury. His relation to Dr. Coke will be discussed further in a later chapter.

When the church was organized at the Christmas Conference, the ministry that was presented to Asbury, as the *responsible* head of this new ecclesiastical venture, was as hopeless a mixture of untrained and inexperienced men as were ever assembled in any great cause. The church was organized with eighty-two American preachers. Not a single one of them, including Asbury, had been ordained previously to that time; sixty-six of the number had not spent as much as five years in the ministry; and twenty-three had not even passed the two-year period of probation.<sup>7</sup> With that unlikely body of ministers, Francis Asbury bent himself to the task of winning the American people to the Methodist standard. The whole world knows how well he succeeded.

The formation of the church was accomplished through the arrangement of Mr. Wesley; but there was both a human and a divine urgency which pressed upon him. The war, the irrepressible dissatisfaction with the humiliating dependence of the ministry, and the insistent appeals from the responsible forces in America, had to be heeded. From October 27, 1771, when Asbury landed in Philadelphia, to the day of his death, there was not a single movement in the development of American Methodism of which he was not a vital

<sup>6</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. II, p. 350.

<sup>7</sup> Warren, *Proceedings of the Methodist Centennial Conference*, p. 169.

part. He was a controlling mind among absolutely independent ministries. Boardman and Pilmoor were not aggressive, and Rankin was too arbitrary to have the sympathy and cordial coöperation of a people of growing democratic sentiments; only Asbury was equal to the responsibility of building a church.

The superficial student of church history will feel that Asbury lived at the most auspicious moment for the founding of a church. So he did. It was a time when the political and the trade life of America were undergoing a complete recasting, and a new religious alignment would fit naturally into such a scheme of change. It may be said with equal force, however, that it was the least auspicious time for founding a church, *except for a man of commanding ability*. The American Revolution had developed a conspicuous leadership for the political life, and it required a great religious leadership to secure recognition among such men as Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin. It was Asbury, a man of undaunted courage, unwavering faith, and uncalculating toil, who stood among the political heroes of that day and led the forces of righteousness with the dignity of a prince.

It was no day for commonplace religious leadership, for other reason than that of contrast with great men. The thought of the people was centered upon political and economic questions—establishing independence, erecting civil authority, forming the institutions, and housing the government that must conserve the fruits of the Revolutionary struggle. Asbury and the Methodists came out of the struggle for political independence with no special claim to public favor. Their English connection had militated against them. As

Washington Irving once shrewdly observed, it was a case of "Cry out mad dog, and every unlucky cur in the streets is in jeopardy." The unfortunate incidents at the beginning of the war placed every Methodist in a difficult and embarrassing position. But Asbury knew the whole people, from General Washington down to the humblest mountaineer or "squatter" in the land. His passion for souls carried him into every home and hamlet with the Methodist appeal, and he founded the church in the hearts and lives of all the people. Thus he overcame prejudices that made a discouraging outlook for the new church.

Whatever may be said of original causes, it was the potent hand, the unassuming genius, and the unceasing labors of Francis Asbury that made the Methodist Church everywhere a fact. And when we shall have given all honor to whom honor is due, the chief place must be reserved for Asbury as the man who gave soul and body to the Methodist movement—the real Founder of American Methodism.

CHAPTER XIV  
CONTRIBUTIONS TO METHODISM

"It may be safely said Francis Asbury was the incarnation of the ecclesiastical genius and religious spirit of American Methodism."

—RIDGAWAY, *Methodist Centennial Conference*

"Around the Tomb of Asbury beat continually the surges of an ever-increasing human life, whose endless agitations shall feel, until the end of time, the shapings of his invisible, immortal hand."

—LITTLE, *Methodist Centennial Conference*

"One of the greatest services which Asbury rendered in those early years was the holding of the Methodist Societies together and keeping them in connection with Mr. Wesley."

—MOUZON, *The Pioneer Bishop of American Methodism*

"No man ever did so much for Methodism in America as Francis Asbury, and no man ever had an eye more single to God's glory in the work he did, and no man ever labored more unselfishly for those among whom his lot was cast."

—SMITH, *Francis Asbury*

"It is not necessary for us to follow the good Bishop in all his travels. They were much the same in their general features, though presenting a multitude of incidents. For forty-five years he was the leading spirit of the Methodist body, and the one who, more than all others, gave form and efficiency to its working power."

—E. E. HALE, in *Christian Examiner*



## CHAPTER XIV

### CONTRIBUTIONS TO METHODISM

FRANCIS ASBURY was such a plain and unpretentious character that it is difficult to realize his true worth. But plain as he was, he was one of the wisest and most farseeing men of his day. He laid no claim to the epochal achievements of the Methodists; but his name is so interwoven with the story of Methodist development that no fact of its organic or spiritual progress can be understood apart from his commanding personality. His wisdom and experience entered into the determination of every important question that was before the church at that period. He furnished the initiative for the solid and constructive measures which established the new church on a firm foundation. His episcopal position gave him some prestige which others did not have, but he had a vision of the future and a grasp of administrative necessity greater than any of the men with whom he was associated. There seems to have been no one with whom he shared his thoughts as to the dangers that threatened the church, or as to his administrative policy. In one of the Conferences where debate ran high, he records that he said but little on any subject. But the power of the man cannot be measured by his speech.

The doctrinal foundation and the itinerancy were brought over from England, as was Methodist discipline; but there had to be an adaptation of these to the American mind and the American situation, and it was Asbury who fitted them to the conditions of the New World. His predecessors all lacked the ability to make their evangelistic desire and purpose effective; but before he had been in America a month he was actively engaged as an itinerant, and under his personal leadership and wise direction the Methodists carried the Gospel to the farthest removed settler's cabin in the whole land. To him, more than to any other, belongs the credit for making the Methodist Church and teaching popular and powerful in its new home.

If the Methodist itinerancy carried the Gospel to the door of the pioneer, it may be said with equal truth that it was Methodist discipline that made Christian character a fact in the hearts and homes of the restless and care-free people who responded to the itinerant's appeal. The insistent urgency of the evangelistic message was everywhere followed up by a regular and systematic inquiry into the experience and spiritual state of every member of the Societies. This discipline was an evangel itself; it helped to keep enthusiasm alive and to create a sense of responsibility for carrying the message to others. The splendid achievement of the evangelistic movement, when it had no recognized church for its sponsor, is one of the miracles of Christian history. Asbury's devotion to Wesleyan discipline entitles him to a large measure of credit for the success of the Methodists in America, and for the development of a type of Christian character that dissolved the political distrusts of Revolutionary days

and disarmed the ecclesiastical and worldly opposition to the evangelistic enthusiasm of the enterprise.

He was the youngest of all the missionaries sent out by Mr. Wesley, and was soon deserted by his English associates who came out to share with him the responsibilities of a great task; but he stood firm throughout the political storm and was steadfast to his ideal. To the end of his days he was a firm believer in the educative and curative values of discipline. Peter Cartwright says that, at the session of the Tennessee Conference in 1815, Bishop Asbury called together the delegates elected to the General Conference and admonished them to hold fast to the landmarks of Discipline.<sup>1</sup> Thus, out of the very shadows of death itself, he was making a last appeal for the continuance of the principles and usages which had helped to establish Methodism and had given it an honorable place in the ecclesiastical family of the United States.

Asbury's first contribution to organized Methodism was when he refused to accept ordination except upon the election of the Conference. Reference has been made to the fact that Mr. Wesley's ordinations were for the purpose of meeting emergencies that had arisen, rather than for setting the Americans up in a church altogether independent of himself. It is no reflection upon Mr. Wesley to say that he felt that continuance under himself was necessary to the success of the movement in America. Asbury, however, had the wisdom and the discernment to see that the social and political differences between England and America were such as to make a ruling connection upon the part of Mr. Wesley a matter of extremely doubtful value. Hence,

<sup>1</sup> Cartwright, *Autobiography*, p. 152.

Asbury's personal attitude and his leadership of the church were based upon the principle and policy of absolute independence of all foreign control. His loyalty to Mr. Wesley would not permit him to violate the most exacting requirements of Christian courtesy. He made no reply to the caustic censure of himself when Mr. Wesley did not understand his action, but he adhered rigidly to his policy of an independent functioning of the American church. In the light of later history, it is easy to see that his was the wiser course.

The issues involved in Asbury's refusal to be ordained as Mr. Wesley's appointee were deeper and more far-reaching than the settlement of the independent government of the church; for by the same stroke the independent general episcopacy of the church was established. His election made him an independent ecclesiastic—his power was derived from the church and his responsibility was to the church. This left him free and unhampered to plan and execute a policy adapted to the needs of the New World, and to work out an organization to meet the problem of a church in the wilderness. It is not necessary to argue that this meant great gain to Asbury and the Methodists of America.

The real making of the Methodist episcopacy was in the fact that Asbury had no theoretical prejudices to satisfy. In his *Journal* he names five facts upon which he rests his episcopal authority: "1. Divine authority. 2. Seniority in America. 3. The election of the General Conference. 4. My ordination by Thomas Coke, William Philip Otterbein, German Presbyterian

minister, Richard Whatcoat, and Thomas Vasey. 5. Because the signs of an apostle have been seen in me." <sup>2</sup> Two things are apparent in this statement: First his conception of the episcopal office was that of a practical service. Second, the office was utterly submerged in his passion for the people. The same thing is borne out in what he says in favor of the general episcopacy as against the diocesan arrangement of the Episcopal Church. <sup>3</sup> It was for him but an extension of the itinerant ministry, and his life as a bishop was in no way different from that of the least conspicuous preacher in the remotest corner of the wilderness; for he asked of others no service and no privation or hardship which he did not accept uncomplainingly for himself.

Asbury was a Methodist, and as such his alignment was a protest against the spiritual emptiness and deadness of the Established Church. The difficulties in trying to conserve the fruits of his ceaseless evangelism in America would certainly tend to remove the temptation to monopolize the power of his office, or to manifest an arrogant spirit toward any sincere Christian. His whole bearing was such as to indicate that he felt that the episcopacy which falls below a practical standard of usefulness and service has no legitimate place in the kingdom of God. His vivid conception of the greatness of the sacrifice for human redemption would not allow him to accept a mechanical standard for the power with which he was invested, nor permit a technical theory of origin and authority to defeat God's eternal purpose in the church.

<sup>2</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 288.



Another distinctly American institution for which Asbury was responsible is the presiding eldership. It is really an extension of the episcopacy, and no single development did more to make administration constant and effective than the presiding eldership. If it had not been for the determination of Asbury this part of the Methodist plan of organization would have met the fate of the Council. He valued the office very highly, and his defense of it brought on the bitterest contests of his whole career. For its maintenance and integrity he suffered more at the hands of his enemies than for all other things combined. It was developed as an arm of the episcopacy, and he knew its value as an asset in administration; but he also knew its potentiality for evil, once it was wrested from episcopal control. Hence, he fought to prevent its being turned over to those who did not share the supreme responsibility in administering the affairs of the church, lest its administrative intention should be defeated.

It is quite likely that in some instances he made mistakes in the selection of men for this important place, and in other instances he must have had a small range of choice. But the minutes of the Conferences show that he chose for this office some of the greatest men he had. The list of his presiding elders includes James O'Kelly, Jesse Lee, Francis Poythress, Richard Whatcoat, Freeborn Garretson, Nelson Reed, Thomas Ware, Reuben Ellis, Thomas Morrell, Valentine Cook, William M'Kendree, Enoch George, Wilson Lee, and Joshua Soule. This list should be sufficient proof of Asbury's high esteem for the office. When we remember that, under the leadership of Asbury and these men, the Methodist Church grew from an unde-







finer evangelistic movement to be a church of nearly a quarter of a million souls at the time of Asbury's death, and to a position of eminence in the religious life of the nation which it has never lost, we cannot but appreciate the great value of the office that carried the Methodist evangel and discipline to the fireside of the last man, and made them effective.

The delegated General Conference is, perhaps, Asbury's greatest contribution to Methodist usage and history. The Annual Conference originated in England and was passed on to America as a part of the Wesleyan system of operation. But the unlimited power of that body—the power to change or even to overthrow the whole constitution and polity of the church by a majority vote—was too serious a weakness to be continued. Asbury soon realized its danger in the hands of men as little trained in such things as were the American pioneers; and it was particularly apparent in his troubles with O'Kelly. He realized that there were no safeguards for the vital doctrines and usages of Methodism, and that the whole system might be wrecked by a bare majority in a moment of excitement. So, in his unobtrusive way, he set himself to establish defenses for the fundamental things of Methodist teaching and practice. The delegated General Conference, with constitutional restrictions, is largely his contribution to that end.

It is safe to say that no other achievement of the early years has done more to make Methodist faith and practice stable and uniform than has the delegated General Conference. It is likely that the organization of the Council was an experiment of Asbury looking to the end that was finally achieved in the delegated Confer-

ence. There may be times when these safeguards make difficult reforms which seem to be indicated as needful; but where there is a large element of doubt in the minds of the people, the church can well afford to wait for the maturing of sentiment in matters that are to become part of the constitution itself. What is lost in time is more than compensated for in the stability which it secures. No period of agitation and upheaval has been of sufficient force to sweep away the foundations of the church that were laid by our Methodist fathers; and American Methodism has delivered itself in a consistent way, and to a definite end, in all the years of its existence.

It has been mentioned already that Asbury launched the educational program of the church while the Revolution was still in progress. At the same time he and John Dickins were planning for the publishing interest, which has done so much for the propagation of Methodist teaching and has supplied such a wholesome literature for the Methodist people. So, too, Asbury saw that the self-sacrificing preachers must be kept from want, and that they had a right to such provision even when they became incapacitated through age or infirmity. Accordingly, he established the "Mite" subscription and the "Chartered Fund," and in those efforts became the advocate of the disabled veteran and a pioneer in all that has been done or shall be done for the worthy servants of the church.

In his personal ministrations, Asbury did not overlook the children and the young people; but the conditions which prevailed in America as to the distribution of population and the facilities for church work

offered no place for the type of young people's organization which came on at a later period. Neither society nor science had reached the stage of development to which the modern hospital belongs. But outside of these two departments of work, there is scarcely an enterprise of the church to-day which Asbury did not initiate or promote. He was a temperance crusader when such a thing meant real heroism for the man who dared to undertake it, and he was a social reformer as a matter of personal conviction long before the idea became an organized and popular form of Christian activity.

Asbury had no theory of church government to satisfy, and he made no blueprint of his own administrative intention. He simply had a great religious ideal and went forward to its realization in the most direct and effective way he knew, and in every way that appeared feasible to his resourceful mind. He was quick to appraise both a need and a method of meeting the need, and for that reason his administration was rich in productive plans for carrying forward the whole task. It was a great piece of good fortune that he lived through the dangerous period of organization and agitation, and that he was spared to safeguard that which his genius had established.

Before his journey was done he saw the church firmly established, with a fixed and effective administrative policy, and with such channels for service as were necessary that the energy and the message of the Methodist faith might be delivered to all the people. He died as he had lived, with his face set toward the furthest outpost of civilization in the New World. In

his last conference with Bishop M'Kendree regarding administration for the future, the radiant hope of his soul is manifest in his vision of the glory of the "western part of the empire"; and he charted five Conferences into which he would send Methodist harvesters.<sup>4</sup>

When Asbury grew old his attitude toward some things narrowed. That was to be expected. He could not separate the episcopacy from himself and the long preëminence he had in it. He says of the General Conference in 1808 that it elected "dear brother M'Kendree assistant bishop,"<sup>5</sup> and so it did. Whatcoat was never more than a traveling companion for Asbury, and M'Kendree never entered fully into his episcopal office until Asbury collapsed. In the part of the letter which is reproduced at the beginning of this chapter, it will be seen that he clung to his right to station the preachers as long as he lived. The truth is that Asbury came to be as jealous of his place and prerogative in American Methodism as Mr. Wesley had been of his authority over the whole movement; and neither was to be blamed, for these organizations were as children of their own bodies.

Mr. George Eayers, of London, paid high tribute to Asbury when he wrote that he "conquered a continent and covered it with a network of circuits and Conferences." But Asbury did more than that, for he stamped his own great mind and heart upon every element of control in those circuits and Conferences. There is a sense in which we shall not see his like again, for the conditions which produced him have passed away and cannot return. He will live on, how-

<sup>4</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 465.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

ever, in the splendid contributions which he made to the Methodism of America, and in the inspiration of his pioneer spirit in forging a way for making real the dream that was in his heart.





CHAPTER XV  
A SPIRITUAL ADVENTURER

"Greatness of character is usually attained through the predominant force of a single principle or passion. A man becomes great by his enthusiasm of devotion for *one* thing."

—BRIGGS, *Bishop Asbury*

"If ever since the days of the apostles, there were any ministers who gave themselves up with exclusive devotion to their work, Asbury was most certainly of that number."

—STRICKLAND, *The Pioneer Bishop*

"In this labour, we have to encounter hunger, heat, and many restless nights with mosquitoes, unwholesome provisions, and bad water; but all this is for souls; were it for silver, I would require a great sum."

. . . . .  
"I do feel as if there had been religion in this country once; and I apprehend there is a little in form and theory left. There may have been a praying ministry and people here; but I fear they are now spiritually dead; and am persuaded that family and private prayer is very little practised: could these people be brought to constant fervent prayer, the Lord would come down and work wonderfully among them."

—*Asbury's Journal*

## CHAPTER XV

### A SPIRITUAL ADVENTURER

It is not the intention of this chapter to deal in a technical way with the purposes of Asbury. Its aim is to show that all he did pivoted about the ends and aims of the spiritual enterprise which occupied his whole heart. There is no evidence that he ever interested himself for his own sake or for the sake of the Methodist Societies, except to save the people. His churchmanship and his theology seem to have been largely secondary to his desire for the salvation of the people. In the dark days of the Revolution, when his soul was greatly perplexed, he says, "but my determination is to trust in God, and be satisfied if the souls of my fellow-men are saved."<sup>1</sup> He said of a community in Virginia: "This neighborhood is supplied with preaching by the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists. All is well, if the people are saved."<sup>2</sup> His adoption of the revival and the camp meeting shows his hospitality to any method that offered an increase of evangelistic effectiveness.

The leadership of Francis Asbury is one of the remarkable facts in connection with early Methodist his-

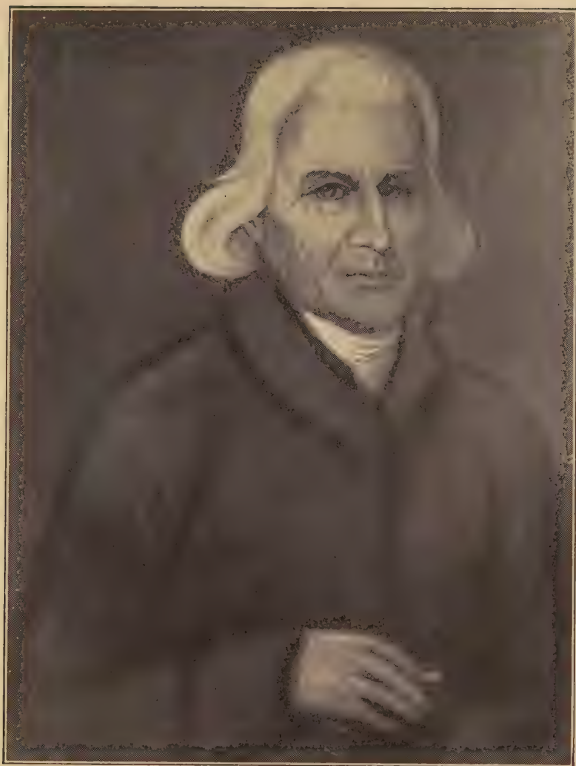
<sup>1</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 239.

<sup>2</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. II, p. 100.

tory. For more than thirty years he was the official head and the ruling spirit of the church. Even before it became a distinct ecclesiastical organization, and when another was its designated head, he did more to shape the development of the Methodist movement than any other man on the continent. To say that he was a great administrator is not a sufficient explanation of his great influence. He ruled through the greatness of his soul, through the unselfishness of his service, and through his loyalty to the spiritual interests of the people.

Notwithstanding the fact that no man's loyalty to a cause was ever more sorely tested than was his, he lost nothing of his devotion to the spiritual interests of the people. He was sorely tried by the clashes of opinion and feeling which he had with the unbending Rankin. His spiritual determination was taxed by his ceaseless travel and bodily ills. He was tested by the opposition of ambitious men who challenged his methods, and in some instances even the integrity of his soul. And the supreme proof of his loyalty to the souls of the American people was the humiliation and suffering inflicted by war. He was deserted by every English associate whom Mr. Wesley had joined with him as missionaries to America. When they counseled him to return to England, he simply refused to leave "such a field for gathering souls to Christ," because to abandon the American Christians would be an everlasting dishonor to the Methodists. His letter to Dr. Benson<sup>3</sup> shows that his English patriotism was appealed to and a prospect of ordination in the Church of England was held out to him; but he steadfastly refused

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix.



FRANCIS ASBURY IN OLD AGE

The original oil portrait on wood by an unknown artist was bequeathed to The American University, Washington, D. C., by Mrs. Sarah Attmore of Strasburg, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. It is supposed to have been painted on his last visit to Strasburg, which was in 1813.



to desert the people to whom he felt himself to have been sent of God.

Asbury had formed friendships that meant much to him, and his years of service would naturally attach him to the people; but his real tie was spiritual. He was in the New World for the cause that filled his soul from the time of his conversion. The quest for souls is so patent upon every page of his Journal, and in the travels and toils which he endured, that it would be like mocking the intelligence of the reader to argue the fact. When he wrote, "But heaven is my object, not earth," he gave the key to every activity of his ministerial career; and no man ever spoke such words with greater accuracy and truth. It is not probable that he looked forward to the organization of an independent church at all, and all that he did was as a lay-preacher, expecting nothing beyond the satisfaction which he had in the salvation of the people.

From the very beginning he was set for the evangelistic task. There is nowhere the least intimation that his coming to America had in it the slightest tinge of romance, or that it was prompted in any degree by a motive not fully consistent with his declared purpose. Saul of Tarsus was never more certainly "a Pharisee of the Pharisees" than was Francis Asbury an evangelist of the evangelists, for he spurned every course which did not promote immediately and positively that end, and adopted every method that commended itself to his judgment as sound evangelistic policy.

So intense was his devotion to spiritual conquest that he refused to indulge in controversy, lest the interest of the people should be diverted from the chief end and aim of the Gospel. He says: "It is a just observa-



tion, that those matters which are the least disputed in religion are the most essential, and those who are the most fond of controverted trifles have the least real religion.”<sup>4</sup> About ten years before his death, he wrote of the Independent society in Charleston, South Carolina: “There is a holy strife between its members and the Episcopalians, who shall have the highest steeple; but I believe there is no contention about who shall have the most souls converted.”<sup>5</sup> In these and numerous other records he shows his utter repudiation of interests and practices which might defeat the main purpose of the Christian enterprise—the salvation of souls. His Journal conclusively bears out the statement that he was first of all, and in all things, a spiritual adventurer.

Asbury’s correspondence, also, shows that he was completely possessed by his spiritual ideal. On May 29, 1791, he wrote to Nelson Reed, who was presiding elder of the Baltimore district, the most searching and minute directions concerning his examination of the local preachers, stewards, and class leaders; and tells him that in the matter of discipline he is to judge as Samuel did.<sup>6</sup> In 1794 he writes John Kobler: “My dear Br.: Press, press purity on thy own soul, on the souls of the preachers and people there, that is the spot we fail. Our glory is departing. We must preach holiness plainly, positively, now to be obtained by grace.”<sup>7</sup>

The spiritual note dominated his preaching. It is said that “he discussed the fundamental doctrines of evangelical religion with clear exposition and forcible

<sup>4</sup> Asbury’s Journal, Vol. I, p. 167.

<sup>5</sup> Asbury’s Journal, Vol. III, p. 210.

<sup>6</sup> Drew MSS.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

logic.”<sup>8</sup> More than once Asbury himself mentions as his favorite text St. Paul’s stirring words to Timothy: “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” One can easily believe that from this source he drew both his ministerial commission and the inspiration for following the American settler with his insistent spiritual appeal. It should be noted that his interest was larger than his own immediate field, for he says once of his experience that his soul was “drawn out in ardent prayer for the universal church and the complete triumph of Christ over the whole earth.” He was willing to tolerate a measure of emotional excess and excitement, and he could applaud the man who “stamped to purpose” when the people were being saved. His spiritual exaltation was never greater than when he received the news of the revivals in Delaware, Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

Asbury’s use of the revival and other group activities does not mean that such was his sole method of attack. He was a persistent and successful example of personal evangelism before such a thing had been given a name. In the homes of the people he addressed every member of the family, including the servants, on the subject of salvation. He spoke to the people whom he met on the highways, and he searched the hearts of those whom he met in the class meeting. Indeed, he felt condemned if in any case he failed to urge people to give their hearts to God. He was an evangelist in season and out of season, and lost no opportunity to deliver his message.

One of the best proofs of Asbury’s devotion to spir-

<sup>8</sup> Larrabee, *Asbury and His Coadjutors*, p. 199.

itual adventure was the attitude which he maintained under the reproaches of those who seized upon the war sensitiveness to outlaw the Methodist ministry and the Methodist cause. He says: "I felt strong confidence in God, that he would deliver me; being conscious that I sought neither riches nor honour, and that what I suffered was for the sake of his spiritual church, and the salvation of my fellow-men."<sup>9</sup> Under the reproaches of his enemies he was human enough to say some things which had a bite in them; but he was Christian enough to hide the story of wrongs done himself in the depths of his own heart. He erased personal censures from his Journal and left his traducers to their conscience and their God.

Asbury was under the influence of the Wesleyan teaching regarding sanctification and appears to have agonized in his own spirit for the ecstatic experience of peace that comes with the conquering of sin. Likewise he stood for the highest spiritual attainment in the people to whom he ministered. On one occasion he says: "I find no preaching does good, but that which properly presses the use of the means, and urges holiness of heart; these points I am determined to keep close to in all my sermons."<sup>10</sup> He believed in a ministry that appealed to every possibility of grace, but he was far too practical to lend himself to a profession which lacked the solid foundations of righteous character. He records: "John Beauchamp and Dr. Bowness, both professed sanctification: I hope it is so. The society is much increased: but all is not gold that shines."<sup>11</sup> In another place he says: "This family

<sup>9</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 271.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 439. <sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 351.

professeth sanctification; whether this be true in the fullest sense I know not; but this I know, that they are more spiritual than ever I knew them: so far it is well, and we go upon safe ground.”<sup>12</sup> On still another occasion he went to hear a certain Mr. Austin on the millennium and reign of Christ upon earth. The speaker applied his text to General Washington as Zerubbabel and to himself as Joshua the high priest; and Asbury observes, “all this appeared to me like wildness of the brain.”<sup>13</sup> He was a spiritual adventurer whose zeal for the salvation of the people consumed him; but he had a poise of mind and character that saved him from empty vagaries and poorly realized spiritual ideals.

In this task of spiritual adventure Asbury invested every energy of his soul and every prospect of his life. He left home and native land behind and plunged into an uncharted wilderness. He was alone and persecuted by some whom he sought to befriend, but he stayed on. In the organization of the church he accepted leadership without the slightest apparent elation, and sought no pecuniary advantage over the humblest and least prepared minister on the field. For thirty years he toiled unceasingly and in all weathers for the munificent sum of eighty dollars per year; and this he shared with his mother while she lived, and often with the poverty-stricken men on the frontiers. It is safe to say that no man ever lost himself more completely in one work than did Asbury; and its difficulty and thanklessness made no change in his mind, for his labor and devotion were unto God and for the sake of souls. His self-effacement was not without cost to himself.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 364.

<sup>13</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. II, p. 309.

He loved his friends with all the fidelity of his soul and he grew "mutely eloquent" at the graves of those whom he had lost. But never once did he turn his face for a retreat, but to the end of his days kept the road in his spiritual conquest.

Asbury was keenly sensitive to the appeals that came to him for the organization of churches and for preachers. Every appeal for help was to him as the Macedonian cry was to St. Paul. It cut him to the heart when he had no preachers for the new fields that were opened. The biographer of Jesse Lee says that when Lee presented the conditions and claims of New England to Asbury, "These arguments were happily offered to one whose Christian sympathies always moved in unison with his duties and responsibilities."<sup>14</sup> The shadows were gathering in his path, but the call of the West was not less insistent than was the call which he had heard in England years before; and as the night drew on he chafed because he could not go to Mississippi and Louisiana, whither he had already sent ambassadors for Christ.

Asbury's passion for spiritual adventure was so great that he could not realize the arbitrariness and unreasonableness of the rules which he imposed upon himself, nor could he understand why some men drew back at the sacrifices which he demanded of them. His opposition to the marriage of ministers was rooted in his zeal for spiritual conquest, and he pressed his work in utter disregard of his own health. There were times when he was seriously ill and when his loss would have imperiled the future of the church, but he pressed on. According to Henry Boehm, he plunged into the wil-

<sup>14</sup> Leroy M. Lee, *Life and Times of Jesse Lee*, p. 251.



derness with two dollars in his pocket for the keep of two men and two horses on a journey of hundreds of miles.<sup>15</sup> Think of it! To be sure, they sometimes went hungry, and sometimes lacked shelter at night; but the frontiers were calling and he must go.

Boone and Crockett and other sturdy pioneers were filled with daring and adventure. They pressed westward over the mountains and pitched their tents in the unbroken forests of Kentucky. Theirs was a conquest of the soil and lacked the hallowing of self-sacrifice. With equally great daring and a holier ambition, Asbury and the early circuit rider followed upon their heels with the message of salvation. There was not a path leading into the bosom of the great West that did not echo to the hoof beat of the steeds upon which those consecrated adventurers of the Cross followed the van of American settlement. And Francis Asbury led the line.

He was not a man who performed a part in a mechanical way, but an inspired spiritual adventurer to whom the world will be indebted to the end of time. His enthusiasm was such that no neutral matter could deflect his interest or attention for a single moment. He settled once and for all the question as to what was of supreme value and would not retrace his steps.

The mission to which Asbury gave himself was not ecclesiastical; it was spiritual. For him Christianity was more vital than a creed and Methodism was greater than a doctrinal system. It was a militant evangelism whose task was to convert the world; and he held himself answerable for America. His weapons were not forged by human hands nor tempered by processes of

<sup>15</sup> Boehm, *Reminiscences*, p. 307.

human wisdom; they were thunderbolts out of the heart of God and directed by the unerring wisdom of the Holy Spirit. Small wonder it was that he achieved such evangelistic success, and came to hold such an honored place in the religious history of America.

He was so consecrated to the warfare for righteousness that it hurt him to find a community that was indifferent to the Gospel. Coming one day to Frankfort, Kentucky, he says: "Here are elegant accommodations provided for those who make the laws, and for those who break them; but there is no house of God."<sup>10</sup> He went everywhere preaching and planning for a moral and religious foundation that was aggressively evangelistic and earnest.

The day is long past when it is required of a Methodist minister that he place every natural affection and every legitimate domestic relationship on the altar of sacrifice. The civilization that has grown up out of the sacrifices of Asbury and his pioneer band has made easier the physical side of the ministerial task. But the time will never come when the true prophet of God will not require a spirit of heroism and daring; nor when a passionate zeal and fervor, like that of Asbury, will not be a mighty factor in determining the religious interest of the world. The real religious development of the future will wait upon the spiritual adventurer, just as it did when the pioneer went forth to sow in the wilderness. And the spiritual adventurer will not miss his meed of praise from those made rich by his devotion, nor his crown of triumph and blessedness in the Father's house.

<sup>10</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 349.



CHAPTER XVI  
ASBURY'S CITIZENSHIP

"I became a citizen of Delaware, and was regularly returned. I was at the time under recommendation of the governor of Delaware as taxable."

—*Asbury's Journal*

"Some time before Mr. Asbury had checked Mr. Rankin in an abusive tirade in conference against the spirit and designs of the Americans. From these facts, Mr. Rankin considered Mr. Asbury as leaning strongly toward the 'rebels.' "

—LARRABEE, *Asbury and His Coadjutors*

"They found Asbury to be a plain, respectable, and intelligent man; a safe, and good citizen; a circumspect, and a pious Christian; a zealous, and a faithful minister of the gospel; and worthy of esteem and confidence as a friend of the country of his choice, of which he had voluntarily, and providentially become a citizen."

—COOPER, *Funeral Address*

"And whatever may be said for or against Dr. Coke on account of the double relation he held to the two bodies of Methodists in England and America, no whisper could be breathed against the propriety of Bishop Asbury's conduct of this affair (regarding the resolutions of loyalty presented to Washington), as he had become an American citizen, was cordially attached to the constitution and government of his adopted country, was seeking to promote its best interests, and regarded the newly elected president with ardent affection and profound veneration."

—BANGS, *History of the M. E. Church*

## CHAPTER XVI

### ASBURY'S CITIZENSHIP

IN the life-story of any great man, there are certain facts of such importance that thoughtful people instinctively demand a clear and positive statement as to these pivotal matters. To accept less than that is to lay a foundation for controversy in one's own mind, and to create embarrassments in the prosecution of the particular interest through which the man became great. No one cares to follow a leader whose purposes he does not comprehend.

When John Wesley did not connect himself with the church which he founded and for which he gave his life, he laid a foundation for criticism by the church from which he held his ministerial commission and created an awkward situation for his followers which continued for many years after the death of the founder. The fact that he never left the Established Church makes no difference to truth, and it certainly could not invalidate Christian experience; but consistency as to church connections has a distinct value in the satisfaction which it affords the man who accepts a leadership with its full implications. No one likes to feel that there is the slightest degree of uncertainty as to the facts which make up his confession of faith, or that the personal commitments of the founder of his

church were not full and complete. In the case of John Wesley, his remaining in the Church of England may have had values which we are not able to appraise now, but it does not satisfy the desire for an unequivocal commitment of himself to the spiritual enterprise which crystallized into a separate church under his masterful guiding hand. It is disappointing, to say the least, that Mr. Wesley's name does not head the list of membership in the Methodist Church.

The same kind of situation arises in connection with the founder of American Methodism when it is made to appear that he gave his life in devoted and unselfish service to the American people, but withheld the final and complete ratification of loyalty to the land of his adoption. There is an incongruity in the suggestion that Francis Asbury, a British subject, laid the foundations of Methodism amid the fires of the American Revolution; that continuing his alienage, he developed its polity and fixed its course under a government and a political ideal concerning which he held distinct reservations; and that he went to his grave still declining to accept allegiance to the land in whose soil his bones were to rest until the call of the Resurrection Angel should abolish obligations "to Cæsar." It is a question which involves everything with which he had to do, and it is but natural that the friends of Methodism should insist upon the clarification of this relationship.

The problem is much easier to state than it is to settle. Asbury was so much a part of the chaotic conditions of revolutionary times, he furnishes so large a part of what we know about his career, and his whole life was so absorbed in the prosecution of spiritual

ideals to the exclusion of everything else, that he left little upon which to build a story of his political allegiance. This question does not seem to have been raised in the earlier years, but after more than a hundred years have gone by we find the widest difference of opinion as to his political status. Dr. Tipple, in his excellent study of Asbury, expresses the opinion that he never became a citizen of the United States. Mr. James Lewis, in a biography recently published in London, expresses the same view.<sup>2</sup> Judge Henry W. Rogers, in his centennial address, says: "Asbury never formally renounced his allegiance to the British government, and he died a British subject. But he was thoroughly American in all his views and feelings."<sup>3</sup>

Against the opinions expressed in the preceding paragraph are the quotations appearing at the beginning of this chapter. To these may be added the statement of Dr. George P. Mains to the effect that Asbury became a loyal and enthusiastic citizen of the United States,<sup>4</sup> and Bishop Leete's statement that "He became naturalized and Americanized."<sup>5</sup> These citations are sufficient to show the wide divergence of opinion concerning the citizenship of Bishop Asbury. They are all impressions and are not given out as mature conclusions resulting from careful study of the subject itself. It is fair to say that data are available for both impressions.

On the side of those who say that he never became

<sup>1</sup> Tipple, *The Prophet of the Long Road*, p. 314.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, *Francis Asbury*, p. 222.

<sup>3</sup> Rogers, *Centennial Addresses*, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Mains, *Francis Asbury*, p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> Leete, *Centennial Addresses*, Abingdon Press, 1916, p. 101.

an American citizen there are certain well-known statements of intention upon the part of Asbury himself. In a letter to his parents under date of October 7, 1772, he says: "Still Old England for me."<sup>6</sup> Again in another letter to his parents, dated Baltimore, January 24, 1773, he writes: "But if the Lord please I think I shall breathe in my own air in a few years; but I cannot say when, as the call for preachers is great, and I cannot leave the work."<sup>7</sup> In his Journal, where he gives the reason for his remaining unmarried, he says: "It had been my intention of returning to Europe at thirty years of age; but the war continued, and it was ten years before we had a settled, lasting peace: this was no time to marry or to be given in marriage."<sup>8</sup> There are probably other instances where he gives expression to the same purpose, but these are sufficient. Besides, there are certain circumstances which tend to create the impression that he did not become a citizen of the United States. He refused to take the Maryland Oath of Fidelity; and he did not take the Delaware Oath, as it was not required of ministers. In view of these circumstances and expressions of purpose it is not surprising that there should be those who think that he never became an American citizen.

On the other hand, there are certain statements which give the impression that Asbury did become an American citizen. His own word is: "I became a citizen of Delaware, and was regularly returned. I was at this time under recommendation of the governor of Delaware as taxable."<sup>9</sup> In a letter to his parents dated September 7, 1793, he says: "I have not forgot Old England, altho I never desire to reside there, yet I could

<sup>6</sup> Drew MSS.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 143.

<sup>9</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 364.



wish I could visit for 8 or 10 months.”<sup>10</sup> He visited Canada in 1811 and records in his Journal: “My strong affection for the people of the United States came with strange power upon me whilst I was crossing the line.”<sup>11</sup> Of the State Oath in Delaware he says: “With a clear conscience, I could have taken the Oath of the Delaware State, had it been required; and would have done it, had I not been prevented by a tender fear of hurting the scrupulous consciences of others. Saint Paul saith, ‘When ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak consciences, ye sin against Christ.’”<sup>12</sup>

This position, likewise, is reënforced by circumstances which are well authenticated. Asbury records that in one of the Conferences he checked Thomas Rankin when he “indulged in a tirade” against the Americans. In 1789 the New York Conference, on the suggestion of Bishop Asbury, passed resolutions declaring its loyalty to the United States Government and to President Washington. This was the first document of the kind presented by any religious body in the United States, and the resolutions were presented to Washington by the bishops of the Methodist Church in person. Bishop Coke, who as the senior bishop should have presented the resolutions, declined to do so on the ground that he was a British subject, and they were read by Bishop Asbury.<sup>13</sup> Henry Smith, in a letter of reminiscences, says that during the War of 1812, Asbury dined with a family in Calvert, Maryland, who were much opposed to the war. The British were in

<sup>10</sup> Drew MSS.

<sup>11</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 367.

<sup>12</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 372.

<sup>13</sup> Bangs, *History of the M. E. Church*, Vol. I, p. 281.



the Bay, and the family spoke freely to Asbury, knowing that he was an Englishman. "He looked uncommonly serious, and said nothing for a while, at last he broke silence and said: 'They have no business here. Let them go home from whence they came. I shall pray against them with my might, that is all I can do.'"<sup>14</sup>

Many other instances might be recorded, but these are enough to show how conflicting opinion as to his citizenship has come about. One thing is clear—no matter what the opinion as to Asbury's political status, no one denies that he fully and completely transferred his heart. He was American to the core, and his whole administration of the Methodist Church was a protest against every possibility of English interference and English domination.

But was Asbury an American citizen? That is the question to be settled. The answer to that question does not at all depend upon his purpose to return to England, nor is it determined by whether he did or did not subscribe to an oath of fidelity. Neither was a specific renunciation of his British allegiance necessary to establish American citizenship. On July 2, 1776, the Continental Congress adopted a resolution which was incorporated in the Declaration of Independence, and by this resolution all the Colonies were absolved from allegiance to the British crown.<sup>15</sup> Immediately all the English missionaries except Asbury made preparation to leave—no other course would have been possible to an honorable man who was not loyal to the American cause. The very fact that Asbury was residing in the Colonies and that he remained there fixes

<sup>14</sup> Drew MSS.

<sup>15</sup> *Journals of the Continental Congress*, Vol. V, p. 507.

beyond question his political status, unless actual declaration *declining* citizenship can be shown.

In the famous Dred Scott case Chief Justice Taney said: "It is true, every person, and every class and description of persons, who were at the time of the adoption of the Constitution recognized as citizens in the several states, became also citizens of this new political body; it was formed by them, and for them and their posterity, but for no one else."<sup>16</sup>

In another case Chief Justice Fuller said: "All white persons of European descent, who were born in any of the colonies, or resided or had been adopted there, before July 4, 1776, and had adhered to the cause of Independence up to July 4, 1776, were by the declaration vested with the privileges of citizenship."<sup>17</sup>

To quote still another case, Chief Justice Morrison R. Waite says: "Whoever, then, was one of the people of either of these States when the Constitution of the United States was adopted, became ipso facto a citizen—a member of the nation created by its adoption. He was one of the persons associating together to form the nation, and was, consequently, one of its original citizens. As to this there has never been a doubt. Disputes have arisen as to whether or not certain persons or certain classes of persons were part of the people at the time, but never as to their citizenship if they were."<sup>18</sup> These perfectly clear decisions are fortified by the principle of law that "The burden of proving alienage is upon him who asserts it."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Dred Scott v. Sanford, 60 U. S., 393, 406.

<sup>17</sup> Boyd v. Thayer, 143 U. S., 135, 163.

<sup>18</sup> Minor v. Happerstett, 21. Wall., 162, 167.

<sup>19</sup> 2 Corpus Juris, 1045 A.B.C.

Thus it will be seen that the decisions of our highest court are so sweeping as to include practically every resident of the Colonies who was not an avowed Tory, and such Asbury never was. It seems clear that, in order for Asbury to have escaped citizenship, he must have declared in an official document his intention to remain a British subject. It is practically certain that he did not do that, for it would have been contrary to his whole attitude and would have destroyed his influence and usefulness in America. It is safe to say, therefore, that Francis Asbury was not only a citizen of the United States, but that he was one of that elect group who enjoy the high distinction of being charter members of the great Republic of the West.

This subject has been gone into at length not for any purpose of criticizing adverse opinion, but for the purpose of setting at rest a question which involves the integrity of character of the man who founded American Methodism. It is not enough to say that he was loyal to the American people, or that he was devoted to the spiritual interests of the people; for his loyalty and devotion could never be complete while he held political reservations. He could not escape the moral responsibility of citizenship through the immunity which may have been granted the ministry in Delaware. The very issue which he faced in Delaware, the same as in Maryland, was as to his loyalty to America. Whatever uncertainty may have resulted from his absolute devotion to spiritual rather than political interests has all been cleared up by the sweeping inclusions of our American court decisions; and it is certain that these inclusions do no violence to the mind and heart of the man who declined to leave his

adopted home except he be thrust out by the hand of providence. He was American by the ties of personal devotion, he is American by the tie of distinguished service, and he is American in the bonds of citizenship.



CHAPTER XVII  
UNOFFICIAL MINISTER OF STATE

"He is entitled to rank as one of the builders of our nation."

—PRESIDENT CALVIN COOLIDGE

"America, unlike other empires, owes all its greatness to religion, especially North America."

—MOORE, *Life of Wesley*

"The whole country is under a debt of gratitude to the Methodist circuit riders, the Methodist pioneer preachers, whose movements westward kept pace with the movements of the frontier, who shared all the hardships in the life of the frontiersman, while at the same time ministering to that frontiersman's spiritual needs, and seeing that his pressing material cares and the hard grinding poverty of his life did not wholly extinguish the divine fire within his soul."

—PRESIDENT THEODORE ROOSEVELT

(The circuit riders) "They are men whom no labor tires, no scenes disgust, no danger frightens, in the discharge of their duty. To gain recruits for their Master's service they sedulously seek out the victims of vice in the abodes of misery and wretchedness. The vow of poverty is not taken by these men, but their conduct is precisely such as it would have been had they taken one; their stipulated pay is barely sufficient to perform the service assigned to them. With much the larger portion, the horse, which they can call their own, and the contents of their valise or saddlebags, are the sum total of their earthly possessions."

—PRESIDENT WILLIAM HENRY HARRISON



## CHAPTER XVII

### UNOFFICIAL MINISTER OF STATE

PRESIDENT COOLIDGE indicated a fertile field for interpreting the religious leaders who have helped to make the history of the nation when he said: "Our Government rests upon religion. It is from that source that we derive our reverence for truth and justice, for equality and liberty, and for the rights of mankind." Many years before this, Dr. William M. Wightman complained of the indifference of the historians to the outstanding leaders of the Methodist Church, and Professor John Miley expressed the belief that, in the failure of the historians to take notice of Francis Asbury, they had really overlooked one of the most effective forces in the nation's development. Another has said: "Asbury took one continent for his own, and left the impress of his colossal nature upon every community within its borders." If this be true, surely "patriotism no less than piety is under obligation to revere the memory of Francis Asbury"; and "it is inevitable that he must, sooner or later, be recognized among our national men of the revolutionary epoch."

In justification of the opinions just recited, it may be pointed out that the first quarter of the present century witnessed a wider and more sympathetic interest

in religious contributions to the national life than has been true of any other period of our history. There has been a revival of interest in Bishop Asbury which seems likely to bring to him the recognition which his long and able service merits at the hands of the American people. Of course he will always be a churchman, and the major emphasis in his interpretation will be ecclesiastical; but it seems that the public has come to feel that some credit for the solid moral foundations of the American government belongs to Asbury, and to the Methodist movement which he organized and directed. It was the genius and the devotion of this pioneer which did most to shape the course and determine the character of the church in the early years; he will be entitled, therefore, to a large share in the credit for whatever contribution Methodism has made to the life of the nation.

It is much easier, however, to claim a measure of credit for Asbury in our national life than to justify the claim by pointing out particulars upon which it is based. He was not a politician in any sense of the word, and he was not engaged in material enterprises; in such things he lived apart from the people. His one interest was religion, and his contribution to distinctly political affairs was expressed in the character of the men who bore the political and economic responsibility in the nation. Ethical and moral quality is one thing, but to point out the social and the economic facts in which it registers is a different thing, and a much more difficult one. Very naturally, public opinion and enthusiasm will enter into the ranking of religious leaders in the story of the country's building; but the marvelous growth of Methodism, and the form of

organization through which the church was carried down to the last man in the remotest settlement in the land, leave no room for debate as to the importance of Methodism as a national force. Certainly the greatest single figure in the first three decades of the history of the Methodist Church was Francis Asbury; and his zeal and determined leadership were the mightiest factors in the accomplishments of Methodism.

English writers have conceded much more to the influence of Mr. Wesley than American writers have conceded to the influence of Asbury. Nehemiah Curnock, in his edition of John Wesley's *Journal*, writes: "John Wesley saved England; Francis Asbury, in the same sense and by exactly similar means, saved America. Asbury, in labors, spiritual force, intensity and persistency of purpose, and absolute selflessness rivalled if he did not outrival Wesley." <sup>1</sup>

To Asbury and his Methodist circuit riders belongs the credit for sowing broadcast the spiritual seed which probably did more to establish justice, love of liberty, righteousness, and integrity of character among the people than any other single influence that operated throughout the formative period of the national history. It is not unlikely that the restraints of Methodist discipline did as much to establish respect for law and social regulation as was accomplished through any part of the political machinery of the new government. The discipline was self-imposed, and this created a sympathy for the restraints which enabled the Methodist people and their friends to give proper value to such measures when imposed by the State. Discipline of character was a pronounced fact throughout the

<sup>1</sup> Curnock, *John Wesley's Journal*, Vol. VI, p. 2.

bounds of Methodism, and those bounds were coextensive with the boundaries of the Republic itself.

It was the conviction of Asbury that drink was the "prime curse" of the United States, and it is safe to say that no man in his day did more than he to throttle the wretched and ruinous riot of intemperance; and no other man or organization stood more resolutely against slavery than the Methodists and their leader. It is useless to speculate as to what might have been the course of events if circumstances had been different; but it is not altogether improbable that Asbury's greatest handicap in dealing with slavery was the caution of politicians who were more concerned with policy than with truth. All in all, he was probably the greatest influence operating against the institution of slavery in the years when the nation was becoming established.

One of the most significant things revealed by Asbury's Journal is the social range of his ministry. He seems to have had access to the homes of the great, and to have had a peculiar charm for many who might be styled the aristocrats of his day. Throughout his long and varied ministry he enjoyed the friendship of judges, governors, senators, and other men of influence and ability, including President Washington. Their homes were his homes, and he held their friendship so firmly that the names of their descendants were to be found upon the registers of Methodism for many years after Asbury had gone to his grave. It is true that he was not able to break through the Calvinistic and intellectual reserve that he encountered in New England, and that he had to overcome the superficial prejudices against the emotional enthusiasms which were characteristic of the Methodists; but this stern preacher of



STATUE OF FRANCIS ASBURY, WASHINGTON, D. C.,  
BY AUGUSTUS LUKEMAN

*"If you seek for the results of his labors you will find them in our  
Christian civilization."*—*Inscription on the pedestal of the monument.*





righteousness won the affection of the great without trimming a sail and without fawning upon their social and economic position.

Mention has been made already of Governors Tiffin, Worthington, and Van Cortlandt, of Senators Bassett and Taylor, and of General Russell. There were also Dr. Hinde, the grandfather of Bishop Kavanaugh; Mrs. Garretson, who was the daughter of Chancellor Livingston; and many other distinguished men and women of that day were staunch friends of Asbury. Who will undertake to estimate the power that was released for the building of the nation through such a host of eminent men and women as is here indicated? These were the lifelong and intimate friends of Asbury; and the record of his contacts with the great was so constant and intimate as to supply many a golden link for the genealogical registers of the early American families, and to furnish valuable aid to those who anxiously knock upon the outer portals of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Greater by far than his influence upon the distinguished men and women of the day were his influence and power over the lives of that multitude of nameless men and women who rose from the ashes of their social humiliation to make America great. It was Francis Asbury who mobilized the wild and irresponsible forces of the great American frontiers and turned them over to the government as a nucleus for the future commonwealths of the valley. His Journal may be interesting as a source of material for completing the genealogies of the historic families of pioneer days; but of infinitely greater significance in the building of the nation is the unpretentious line recording the first



Methodist Conference held on the soil of Kentucky: "Our conference was held at brother Master-son's. . . . Brother Poythress is much alive to God. We fixed a plan for a school, and called it Bethel." <sup>2</sup> It points to the wisdom that made for national stability and progress.

To represent Asbury as a religious enthusiast aimlessly careering up and down the Atlantic seaboard is far from the truth. Regarding him thus, President Stiles of Yale was coldly indifferent to him, little dreaming that this unpromising man was leading a host whose influence in the making of the nation would soon outweigh that of any other single church, and that the time was not far distant when his followers would be reckoned by the millions. But such was the case. Through his passionate appeals for righteousness and holiness unto the Lord, he stamped the American home and community life with ideals of purity and devotion which cannot be left out of the national audit; and he set on foot agencies for the education and the Christianization of the whole people the full meaning of which cannot be known until the last page of the history of the nation shall have been written.

Many particular enterprises which Asbury undertook failed for the time, but the spirit and the ideal out of which they were projected survived. When the patriarch of American Methodism laid down his life in the humble home of his Virginia friend, there was not a spot in the United States where the Methodist Church was not a fact, nor was there a community upon which the Methodist ideal of character had not

<sup>2</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. II, p. 85.

been stamped—all through the labors of Francis Asbury.

That he was a great and worthy contributor to the social and political ideals of the people cannot be justly questioned. He was one of the chief forces in the moral and spiritual undergirding of our national life. His long and able service as a leader of the Methodists helped to make stable and permanent the great American experiment in democratic institutions. Who will dare to say where we might have drifted had it not been for the faithful and persistent sowing of Asbury and the Methodist pioneers? He was unlike the semi-religious leaders of a century before, for he had no political aspirations and was tempted by no portfolio of State. But as a public benefactor he was probably more influential than any one of those who accepted official rank.

Gustavus Adolphus, of Sweden, the hero of the Thirty Years' War, is written down in history as one of the ablest leaders and one of the most courageous and unselfish men who ever drew the sword in defense of the religious liberties of mankind. But this man of chivalrous heart and knightly valor fell in the hour of victory. He was preëminently a man of war, and victor though he was there was no one to grasp his sword out of the dust into which it had fallen. Wallenstein, the terrible, was never able to regain his military prestige after Lutzen; but sixteen long, weary, and distressing years dragged themselves out before the peace of Westphalia made real that which Gustavus Adolphus had won.

Richelieu, in the toga of a priest of Rome, made himself the mightiest man in the French nation. He

crushed feudalism, he strangled anarchy with the hand of absolute power, and he cleared the way for the golden age of the French monarchy. But John Lord says that the man who began as an amiable flatterer soon became a heartless and unscrupulous tyrant, cordially despised by everybody. He founded the French Academy, but took care to make it minister to his own selfish and base purposes. Under the robes of a cardinal he carried all the genius and the treachery of a Napoleon. He lacked nobility of soul to commend the policies which he made terribly real, and all his instincts were such as to make ultimately certain the catastrophe which he temporarily averted. The very anarchy which he had repressed with an iron hand stalked forth out of the shadows in the hour that Richelieu, the prime minister, died. He had neither sympathizer nor successor to carry on.

It has been said of Oliver Cromwell that "it is more difficult to treat him critically than rhetorically." No one needs to be told, however, that his was a great organizing mind, and that there was a high religious appeal in the circumstances which caused him to challenge the frivolous and extravagant excesses of Charles the First. But the man who started out as the champion of popular rights made a virtue of expediency, stained his hands with blood, and ended by establishing himself as a political dictator—a position which he even undertook to transmit to his son. He lost something of the splendid idealism with which he and his "Iron-sides" started out to redress the national wrongs; and he forfeited a measure of the confidence of the English people in the unselfish resolve of his mighty endeavor. It is true that he undertook many wholesome and needed

reforms, but it was too late for them to succeed when enthusiasm for "The Protector's" exploits had died. Cromwell's tragic end is described by Blaise Pascal in one simple but tremendous sentence: "A grain of sand in the ureter of Cromwell restored the fortunes of the royal house of England, and changed the history of Christendom." The Protector dead, his sword had lost its power.

Francis Asbury had much in common with these seventeenth-century champions of right and order. He had the organizing ability, the appreciation of discipline, and the determination which belonged to them all. He was as ascetic as Cromwell, he had something of the diplomatic genius of Richelieu, and he was certainly not lacking in the spirit of self-sacrifice and chivalrous adventure which led the Swedish hero to champion the cause of the oppressed people of Germany. But he had that which all these masters of courts and leaders of armies lacked—he had an intense faith and fervor, a passion for the souls of men, which was ever separate from all questions of public policy and political interest, and even from social affairs as such. Hear him: "I want no temporal business of any kind."<sup>3</sup> "Company does not amuse me, congress does not interest me: I am a man of another world, in mind and calling: I am Christ's; and for the service of his church."<sup>4</sup> He began as a voice in the wilderness, and at the end of forty-five years, when he had won almost a quarter of a million people to the Methodist standard, it was still the same voice. In the course of the years his power had become well-nigh absolute, but his soul

<sup>3</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. I, p. 173.

<sup>4</sup> Asbury's Journal, Vol. III, p. 217.

was still unblemished, and his life was so transparent that no stain has ever attached to his name. He kept so consistently to the task of preaching the gospel of salvation for all men that he had little bitterness to account for and left few scars to be healed.

Gustavus Adolphus, Richelieu, and Cromwell were all connected with religion and the State; all misplaced the supreme emphasis, in that the State came to be first in their thought and purpose. Each shone like a fiery meteor for one brilliant moment in the history of the world, and then vanished into the long night. But Francis Asbury came to the zenith of his power in the great church which he founded and in the soul of the nation which he helped to establish, and there he abides. He would not suffer himself to become entangled with politics, and even when the shadows gathered in his path he refused to abandon his life-long task. One day the venerable and valiant soldier of the cross fell by the road side—his work was done. No, his life was done. The knightly M'Kendree moved to his place at the head of the column, and the moral and spiritual conquest of America went on, undisturbed by the fall of this Unofficial Minister of State. The glory of the Methodist Church and the resplendence of American civilization will not owe more to any man who wrought in the days of their founding than to Francis Asbury.

CHAPTER XVIII  
ASBURY'S INDIVIDUALITY

"Like Cæsar, nothing stood before him (Asbury) all his days; he swept aside every hindrance, and lived as though he were only a mind with a great divine object before it."

—LEWIS, *Francis Asbury*

"Asbury lovingly regarded Wesley as his leader, except when conscience and the religious needs of the American nation compelled him to strike out for himself."

—GEORGE EAYERS, in *Methodist Review*

"His mind was stamped with a certain greatness and originality which lifted him above the merely learned man, and fitted him to be great without science, and venerable without titles."

—JOSHUA MARSDEN, quoted by Strickland, *The Pioneer Bishop*

"Cotton Mather and Thomas Prince were his superiors in learning. Edwards and Dwight were more eminent theologians, and Gilbert Tennant and President Davies were better pulpit orators; but take him all in all, there is no one of them, nor any one else whom this country has produced, who possessed that peculiar combination of gifts, and endowment of rare qualities, which gave this humble Methodist preacher that position among American divines which Saul occupied among his brethren."

—COGGSHALL, *Methodist Review*



## CHAPTER XVIII

### ASBURY'S INDIVIDUALITY

JUST before the execution of Socrates he discoursed with his friends concerning immortality, and Plato records these words: "Many are the wand-bearers, few are the inspired." In this very telling phrase he means to signify the nature of the authority in obedience to which men act, and the authority which determines their difference of attitude to the elemental problems of life. Many of the inevitable distinctions of life and service are traceable to a difference of motive which is here indicated. No argument is necessary to prove that the facts implied in this statement of Socrates have always been true of human conduct. Neither is it necessary to say that the moral and intellectual tone of history and of civilization is fixed by the "few" who are "inspired," while the "wand-bearers" simply gather fagots for the execution of those whom they have no power to coerce. The final factor in the decision as to names offered for canonization in history will always be whether they were of the "few" or the "many."

In the case of Francis Asbury, he is one of the most outstanding religious personalities of American history. His toil, his devotion, and his absolute self-giving were so great as to place that question beyond controversy. He accepted for his own life the severe standard of

righteousness and service which he preached to others. But the interpretations of his life have turned too exclusively upon his heroism of endurance and the absoluteness of his consecration. At the hands of apologists he is made to appear as a colossal example of spiritual immolation and physical martyrdom, in a cause and after a method prescribed in every minutest detail by one whom he confessed to be his spiritual and ecclesiastical father—to state it directly, as one of Mr. Wesley’s “wand-bearers” in the New World. It really seems that the friends of Asbury were so intent upon making a saint that they spoiled a soldier; and in the practical matters he is made to appear largely negative in the most stirring and colorful age of our history. Even so wise and discerning a man as John McClintock did not include him among those who revived “the Age of Chivalry . . . in the beginnings of Methodism.”

The enemies of Bishop Asbury spared no effort to fix upon him the iniquities of an intolerable autocrat who drove relentlessly for the thing which he had in mind. Except for the motive which they attribute to him, their interpretation seems to be nearer the truth than that which represents him as the pious shadow of Mr. Wesley. Intensely religious as he was, he was anything but a negative man. He never announced his differences nor proclaimed his opinions with a silver trumpet, but they were certainly revealed through the silence and the dogged determination of his soul. His whole career reflects the independence of thought and action which characterized the period of American history during which he lived. If we care to know, we may be assured that he had the daring of a man

whose soul is ruled by a great passion, and he consulted not with flesh and blood when it came to making effective the organization for whose functioning he was responsible.

Reference has already been made to his educational and cultural limitations, deficiencies which would have destroyed a man with less than Asbury's resolution. When he writes his parents that he is "not polite enough" for the Americans, there is a meaning in those words which cannot be understood without some knowledge of his educational handicaps. In a letter written to his parents from Staffordshire, England, reproduced in part elsewhere in this book, it will be observed that he uses a small letter in writing the personal pronoun of the first person. Distasteful as is the undue emphasis of that same pronoun, we would be slow to accept a man for leadership who ran to the other extreme, as is here shown to have been true of Asbury. He made practically no contribution to the religious literature of his day, but through consistent study he overcame much of his educational handicap. It is true that the rank and file of the Methodists were not of the educated class, but the leaders were compelled to contest the field with those who were educated. The growth of the Methodist Church and the constantly increasing prestige of Asbury show how thoroughly he measured up to the demand laid upon him.

The unordered state of the Societies before the Revolution and the turmoil of war furnish splendid opportunity for study of the personality of the leaders of Methodism. The contest regarding the ordinances was such as to show the strength and determination of the men on both sides. From the day in 1773 when

Asbury was appointed to serve with Robert Strawbridge in Baltimore, until the organization of the church in 1784, the ordinance question was the problem of Asbury rather than the problem of Mr. Wesley. In that contest John Dickins and Philip Gatch were among those who opposed him, and the opposition of Dickins was so pronounced that he desisted from traveling for a time rather than sign the agreement which Asbury proposed in his efforts to settle the controversy. When we consider the absence of all ecclesiastical obligations or ministerial vows, it is truly remarkable that he was able to hold together the group of preachers when the people were so clamorous for the symbols of their faith.

So, also, we have evidence of the independence of Asbury in the trying political experiences which he had during the Revolution. In a day when the American cause rested upon a mere shadow of power, and when the colonies were without internal safeguards, he refused to subscribe to the Oath of Fidelity prescribed in Maryland, and did not take the Oath of Delaware. Garretson, Peddicord, Hartley, and others were grossly mistreated; all his English associates fled; but he stayed on and kept his course—not of disloyalty, but of conviction and devotion to his spiritual ideal.

It must not be supposed, however, that Asbury's individuality was manifest only in resistance, for he was a man of pronounced initiative as well. It has been shown already that the greater part of the policy of Methodism bears the stamp of his mind and heart. In 1786 he introduced Sunday schools in Hanover County, Virginia, and in 1796 directed the organization of prayer meetings in Baltimore. In a letter to

John Haggerty, dated January 30, 1796, he expresses the fear that the Baltimore society is falling into formality, and directs that prayer meetings be established in every part of the town where they can be admitted, two nights in the week.<sup>1</sup> In this movement he may have had suggestion from custom elsewhere; but it shows, nevertheless, the individuality and initiative of Asbury in meeting the exigencies of a situation.

In exactly the same manner he added the revival and the camp meeting to his evangelistic method, and made of them telling and effective parts of his policy of conquest, particularly in the frontier settlements. He was keenly alive to every suggestion that seemed likely to help his cause and hasten his victory. All these things go to show the marked independence and resourcefulness of the man who was preëminent in directing the early movements of Methodism.

In the study of Asbury's administrative contests, we have seen that he was a man of convictions and that he held constructive views as to church government. He did not always have immediate success, but it is certain that he did not surrender his ideals; he kept at his purpose until it became an established fact. No piece of the practical machinery of Methodism did more to reveal Asbury's force of character than the presiding eldership. An appointive presiding eldership was vigorously opposed throughout his whole episcopal career, and in its defense he displayed the courage of a knight. Arrayed against him were some of the greatest men of the church, but an elective presiding eldership did not pass the Conference until more than four years after Asbury was in his grave; and then it had a fatal

<sup>1</sup> Drew MSS.

encounter with his Spartan son in the ministry, Joshua Soule.

There can be no doubt that he came to have certain very fixed convictions with reference to the rights and powers of the episcopacy, but it is equally certain that he kept an open mind with reference to some features of the office, at least. In a letter dated from Philadelphia, July 19, 1803, he declared himself as being in favor of an Annual Conference having the liberty of electing its own bishops when it has as many as one hundred members, and he says that these bishops should be elected for a term of six years. For this radical idea he gives the reason: "I think that each Conference could bring a bishop under the same discipline as they do the presiding elder."<sup>2</sup> The consistency of this plan may be questioned and its wisdom might be attacked, but little can be said against its originality, or the personal daring of the man who conceived it.

One other opinion which he advanced with reference to the episcopacy is worthy of notice. In his letter to Dr. Benson,<sup>3</sup> he refers to his broken health and to the fact that he is past seventy years of age; then he adds: ". . . and it has been for some years past a permanent sentiment with me that in such case no man high in office, however great in qualifications, should stand in high responsibility in the Church of God; but rather retire and give place to younger and stronger men in body and mind." There are in this opinion a magnanimity of spirit and an element of sound reasoning which are its sufficient commendation; and while it might not be wise to adhere to it as an inflexible rule

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix.



it reveals the administrative wisdom of the man who founded the church.

When Dr. Thomas Coke first met Asbury he records his impression in the following words: "I exceedingly reverence Mr. Asbury, he has so much wisdom and consideration, so much meekness and love, and, under all this, though hardly to be perceived, so much command and authority." <sup>4</sup> That which was "hardly to be perceived" at the first came to be a terrible reality to Dr. Coke, who was neither a bad man nor an ordinary man. He was not always judicious in what he did and said; but when he is charged with all his mistakes the fact remains that his chief difficulty as an American Methodist bishop was the man of iron and autocratic will with whom he had to deal in the person of his colleague, Francis Asbury.

One of the most important Coke letters which has come down to us is an eight-folio-page defense of himself in the matter of his American connection. It is really a pathetic document. He writes to the New York Conference from Falmouth, England, under date of January 6, 1806, and disclaims any intention of attacking Asbury; but his letter amounts to the charge that he had practically thrust Dr. Coke out of the office to which he had been *appointed, elected, and ordained*. Following the vote of the General Conference to strengthen the episcopacy, he says: "I was moved by my ardent love of the work to offer myself to you as a Coadjutor with Bishop Asbury, *for the strengthening of the Episcopacy*." Dr. Coke says that, in the plan of operations proposed by Bishop Asbury, he was astonished to find himself assigned to ride in the snows

<sup>4</sup> Southey, *Life of Wesley*, Vol. II, p. 302.



of New England "*merely* as a preacher," while "Bishop Asbury was to hold the three Southern Conferences entirely by himself." He then says that after it was decided that he was to return to Ireland, he accompanied Asbury to the Southern Conferences, but was not "consulted in the least degree imaginable concerning the stationing of a single preacher." He says that Bishop Asbury was too ill to reach Charleston for the Conference, and that he offered to hold it for him. Then follow these amazing words: "But he refused me & appointed Brother Jackson to station the Preachers, & Brother Jesse Lee to sit as Moderator in the Conference." A few years later, in 1804, he attended the Georgia Conference with Bishop Asbury, but was not consulted "on the station of a single Preacher: nay, when I asked for a copy of the Stations of the Preachers at the close of the Georgia Conference, which was granted to every Travelling Preacher present, I was refused."<sup>5</sup> This entire letter is a most interesting side light upon Asbury; and nowhere in the literature of early Methodism is to be found a more informing document as to his stern individuality.<sup>6</sup>

It is needless to say that Asbury's course cannot be defended on other than practical grounds. Dr. Coke was a bishop and equal in technical authority with Asbury. On this point he says: "I had been consecrated by our venerable Father in the Gospel, the late Mr. Wesley, a Bishop particularly for America. I had been the means of establishing your present form of Church-Government." He was on solid ground in the complaint which he registered against Asbury and

<sup>5</sup> See Asbury's Journal, Vol. II, p. 359; Vol. III, p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix for the complete text.

the American Conference; as a bishop he did not receive the consideration to which he was entitled. But Asbury's course was determined here, as in everything else, by practical rather than ecclesiastical and technical considerations. Dr. Coke lacked adaptation for the American episcopacy, and Asbury had no intention of allowing a disturbing factor to impede the progress of the cause of Christ and the Methodist Church. He was out for an end which was not to be defeated by conventional considerations.

It has been said that Fletcher contemplated coming to America; and Dr. William M. Wightman says: "Application was made to Mr. Wesley to send Joseph Benson to America, but it was providentially not done. His eminence was such that Asbury would have been subordinated; and that would have meant disaster."<sup>7</sup> In view of all the facts, it would seem that Dr. Wightman's apprehensions as to the subordination of Asbury were groundless. The good fortune was that of Dr. Benson, who probably died happier than he might have done if he had been forced to measure swords with Asbury.

The men who had the highest appreciation of the individuality of this pioneer leader were those who had the misfortune to find themselves at variance with his will. They were not always just in their estimates of his character, but they knew him too well to underestimate the seriousness of a clash with him. Strawbridge, Dickins, Hammett, O'Kelly, Lee, Snethen, Coke, Wesley—all these might give valid testimony on this point.

These things must not be taken to discredit the

<sup>7</sup> Wightman, *Biographical Sketches*, p. 11.

spiritual integrity and the intense devotional spirit of Asbury. His very devotional spirit made him a man of iron convictions; and because of his passion for souls he was no "tin soldier red with rust" and he was no "wand-bearer." He was a stern warrior for the things he believed to be true, and for the procedure which he believed to be necessary to the stability and the success of the cause in America. He did not fold his episcopal tent until the nightfall of death was at hand, and then he drew a sketch of the Conferences he would erect in the West, and passed it over to M'Kendree with the control which he had held so long. The man who began as a pioneer came to the end of his way with the pioneer heart with which he began. And the man who had "printed the map of his ministry with the hoofs of his horse" died as he had lived, with his breast to his problem and his face to the frontiers.

## CHAPTER XIX

### CONCLUSION

"At the home of his old friend, George Arnold, within twenty miles of the City of Fredericksburg, he met the chariot and the horsemen."

—BISHOP E. E. HESS

"Our dear Father has left us, and gone to the Church triumphant. He died as he had lived, full of confidence, full of love."

—*Letter of John W. Bond to Daniel Hitt*

"And here let us pause to say, that a grander specimen of Christian apostle than Francis Asbury the world never had. Much as we revere the memory of Wesley, we regard Asbury with an almost equal veneration."

—TYERMAN, *Life and Times of John Wesley*

"O that names and parties were done away! that Christians were all but one body! that pure love might reign alone in every heart! Lord, hasten the happy and desirable period."

—*Asbury's Journal*

"May that Church which so long enjoyed the services of this eminent minister of the sanctuary, and for whose prosperity he so diligently and conscientiously toiled and suffered, not only cherish a grateful remembrance of his Christian and ministerial virtues, but be long blessed with a succession of ministers who shall make *his* virtues *their* exemplar, and transmit to posterity unsullied those pure doctrines of Christ which *Francis Asbury* so faithfully and so successfully proclaimed."

—YOUNGS, *History of Methodism*

## CHAPTER XIX

### CONCLUSION

How soon are we come to the limits imposed by a single volume, and how much remains to be told of the career of Francis Asbury! We have not touched that vast realm of physical fact and social circumstance which combined to make the life and labors of this pioneer preacher one of the thrilling tales of American history. The story of his itinerant journeyings has enthralled the hearts and minds of men for more than a hundred years. He rode in all weathers, up and down the sides of precipitous mountains and by Indian trails into the very heart of the wilderness; and the charmed life he bore as he passed again and again along paths infested with bloodthirsty savages is a more fascinating story than any "Leather Stocking Tale" or other romance of the American frontier.

The perils which he endured in swimming swollen streams and crossing rivers on ferries that seemed to court disaster; the unspeakable discomforts of the wilderness cabins where he found hospitality after riding forty or fifty miles, often through rain and snow, while he preached to the people along the way; his untold suffering from cold and physical hunger—these experiences proclaim more eloquently than any words

could do the hunger of his heart for the salvation of the people.

The sparseness of the population, the adventurous character of the pioneer, the absence of moral restraints which develop with social advance, the utter poverty of the people, the absence of schools and the consequent illiteracy, were conditions which neither dampened his ardor nor lessened his faith. No saint of the Church of Rome ever more certainly earned the right to canonization than did he; and no Hebrew prophet was ever more consumed with zeal for God and his people than was Asbury for the multitudes whom he had undertaken to shepherd. But this fascinating romance of faith and devotion must be left to the imagination of the reader.

At times the temptation has been great to turn aside from our study and linger for a look at the palatial homes and the lordly estates where this apostle of Methodism found rest and refreshment, and upon which he left a spiritual stamp that passed down from generation to generation. At Judge White's in Delaware he found asylum during the days when his soul was tortured by the suspicions and persecutions of war. Over the threshold of the home of Senator Bassett he left a halo which the years have not extinguished. In the home of General Russell, at "the salt works," he found physical comfort and spiritual inspiration. To the homes of Governor Van Cortlandt of New York, Governor Tiffin and Governor Worthington of Ohio, and to many others he was wont to go as his Savior went to the home in Bethany on the slopes of Olivet. These homes make a chain of religious friendships as beautiful as were ever recorded in any literature on





HOUSE OF GEORGE ARNOLD IN SPOTTSYLVANIA COUNTY, VIRGINIA, IN WHICH BISHOP ASBURY DIED,  
MARCH 31, 1816



earth. They all loved him, and well they might esteem such a friend.

Then there are the administrative shrines which have become as jewels in the history of a great church. Perry Hall, the baronial estate of the once worldly and skeptical Harry Dorsey Gough, whom Asbury enriched with heavenly treasure, was the home of the Methodist circuit rider for many years, a place of true Methodist devotion, and the place where Asbury and the leaders of the Methodist Societies met and made ready for the momentous events of the "Christmas Conference." The very dust of the site of Lovely Lane Chapel is sacred to the Methodist pilgrim, for there the Methodist Church became a fact. At the Green Hill House, near Louisburg, North Carolina, the newly invested Bishop of Methodism first tried his "'prentice han'." There are the shrines in Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, the Holston country, Pennsylvania, and New York. What a story of religious adventure is bound up with these consecrated sites! Rich are the memories and beautiful the traditions that cling to them, as the scent of the roses to the vase that is broken. We can only cast a yearning look and press on.

No book can tell the whole story of a worthy life. This volume undertakes only to account for the outstanding facts in the career of the man whose ministry left a tinge of romance upon every road and Indian trail in all the land, and whose personal devotion left a glow in the hearts and homes where he stopped from Maine to the Holston. In the leave-taking no summary of conclusions will be found, for these have been already accepted or rejected. It is the privilege of the reader

to inquire now as to his own reactions to what has been presented.

It has not been an easy task to put sentiment and popular impressions out of mind in order that the true foundations of Asbury's greatness might appear. It has been difficult to hold apart the distinct elements of his character, for his virtues were fused in his great soul and they blended in his single aim. In these chapters effort has been made to give honest and fair value to the *life* of Asbury, rather than to please any group of readers or satisfy popular fancy. His high position and power have been used as a means for discovering the man, as being the source of all the inspiration to be found in the story of what he was and did. A full appreciation of the man cannot be had without a fair understanding of early Methodist history, for there is to be found the atmosphere of romance out of which he came. No study can give that background without becoming tedious and uninteresting on account of secondary and detail matter.

The church in Asbury's day was much as it is now. Great and small men alike had their ambitions, and they were clamorous for their own as they have been through all the years. Enough has been said to show that no single preacher of that day accepted defeat in good grace; and Asbury's position was so commanding that none of the thunderbolts of ecclesiastical wrath missed him. There is sufficient in the records to indicate that the oft-repeated story of preachers' dispersing after Conference and going to their widely scattered fields with joyful thanksgiving is pure romance and myth. There were good and loyal men who accepted their assignments, but the human factor was always

there, and it served to complicate Asbury's problem and to embarrass his administration.

Outside the Methodist Church and the matters which occupied its attention, Asbury does not appear to have had any active interest. Concerning other religious beliefs he held positive views, particularly as to Calvinism. He showed a measure of catholicity in that he was willing to hear the message of any earnest and evangelical man, no matter what his creed; but his catholicity was never of the supine and compromising kind. He had no hospitality for what he regarded as unsound interpretations of truth, and no patience with men of doubtful morality.

His Journal shows that he had to contend with much the same general condition as that which troubles the church to-day. Social and economic changes have varied the setting, but the contest is still the same. Dr. George G. Smith says that, of the first four American preachers admitted, three ended wretchedly. The records show that Abram Whitworth and Isaac Rollins became apostate and that Joseph Cromwell turned to drink. These facts should give pause to the pessimism that rails against the degeneracy of our times, while it reminisces in glowing term about the "good old days."

Bishop Asbury was not a man who shaped events more than he was a man shaped by events. He probably lacked the ability, certainly the disposition, to work out a theory of action. He was himself the product of his field of labor, and his powers were developed in actual contact with the task through which he was discovered to the world. In administration and in social policy he was like a stone that is being shaped

and polished by the slow movements of a great glacier. On the American field he was a faithful administrator and an adventurous prophet to the people whom he gathered by the most direct and personal type of ministry ever known. His intimate acquaintance with his field was such that it is safe to say no other man knew as he did every road and settlement from Maine to Georgia, and westward beyond the Alleghenies. He knew the whole country as the woodsman knows the forest through which he ranges. Better than that, he knew the people of America, and he knew the Power that could make them into solid pillars for the New Republic.

When we take into consideration the great personal service which Asbury rendered to the people and to the church, it is no matter of wonder that preachers and people gazed with streaming eyes after this venerable patriarch when they realized that they were looking for the last time upon the familiar figure whose coming had been the benediction of the years. The tears of those rugged sons of the New World paid homage to which their lips were not equal, and a homage which the venerable Bishop richly deserved.

It is somewhat disappointing that a man of Asbury's greatness has received such scant recognition at the hands of those who have undertaken to write the story of our social and national progress. It shows that no great and worthy leader can afford to take soundings of popular appreciation as to what he purposes or what he does. The deeds themselves are vastly more important than credit given or withheld. It has been truthfully said: "To have done things worthy to be written in history, more than compensates a truly great man



for the omission of his name from the historic records."

A window-cleaner once said to William James of Harvard: "There's not much difference between one man and another, but what there is, is important." It is doubtful if any of the great philosophers ever gathered more of truth and practical wisdom into a single expression than is to be found in this sentence from the lips of this man of simple and humble life. It is likely, too, that no man ever better illustrated what that window-cleaner meant than did Francis Asbury, who was not a man of many marked and distinguished qualities, but a man of one supreme purpose, and a man whose *soul* and *mind* and *body* were all alive.

More than once it has been intimated that he was not a man of scintillating gifts, but rather one of sterling qualities of soul who went to his task under the drive of a great spiritual ideal. There was perhaps not a single spectacular moment in his whole career; but, on the other hand, there was no moment which was not as solid in its significance as each stone in the masonry of a great arch. In every detail of his life Asbury must be regarded as of the intensest type of spiritual devotion; but he was, nevertheless, in the most real and commanding sense *a man*—a man of profound convictions, of resolute purposes, and one who, when his judgments were matured, held to his high ideal until he had stamped it into his supreme design. Such a man needs no eulogistic commendation and his doings need no apology. He will live and be remembered because of the high quality of his soul, and he will be held in grateful esteem for his unselfish devotion to others.



Ezekiel Cooper says that Asbury often sang as the plaint of his burdened heart :

Still out of the deepest abyss,  
Of trouble I mournfully cry ;  
And pine to recover my peace,  
To see my Redeemer and die ;  
I cannot, I cannot forbear  
These passionate longings for home.  
O, when shall my spirit be there !  
O, when shall the messenger come !

Thy nature I long to put on,  
Thine image on earth to regain ;  
And then, in the grave to lay down  
This burden of body and pain.  
O, Jesus, in pity draw near,  
And lull me to sleep on thy breast ;  
Appear, to my rescue appear,  
And gather me into thy rest.

To take a poor fugitive in,  
The arms of thy mercy display,  
And give me to rest from all sin,  
And bear me triumphant away ;  
Away from a world of distress ;  
Away to the mansions above ;  
The heaven—of seeing thy face—  
The heaven—of feeling thy love.

At the sunset hour, diseased and broken, but still on the march, Asbury's exhausted frame refused longer to serve his indomitable will. At the home of George Arnold in Virginia he stopped for the few hours that remained until the Reaper should come. There was no hospital bed upon which to rest his sick and tired body, no skilled nurse to minister with her soothing touch, no physician to make easier his dying hour. From the house by the side of the road the soul of

Francis Asbury went out on its last long pilgrimage, to be with God and the redeemed hosts of heaven forever more. They buried Jehoida, the priest, among the kings; but Francis Asbury, the prophet of righteousness and the promoter of national progress, they buried by the side of the road; and from the road side for more than a hundred years he has continued to preach loyalty to truth and sacrificial service to men.



## APPENDICES



## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A<sup>1</sup>

LETTER FROM BISHOP ASBURY TO DR. JOSEPH BENSON

South Carolina, Jan'y 15th, 1816

My venerable and elder Brother in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, and the glorious ministry of the Gospel of the grace of God—All hail. We have lived to see better days than our predecessors and ancient contemporaries. I recollect not to have seen your face to have known you, or to have had the least passing interview with you; but when I was a youth between fifteen and sixteen years of age, you were a man, and president of Kingswood school; which must be in my calculation between fifty and fifty-five years past. Though I was active for some years

<sup>1</sup> Bishop Asbury dictated this letter to Thomas Mason, who kept a copy to which he certified. The copy passed to Bishop Soule and came into the hands of Bishop McTyeire with the papers of Bishop Soule. Later it came to Candler School of Theology of Emory University, Georgia, with the official and other papers of Bishop McTyeire. Attached to the manuscript copy made by Thomas Mason, is an unsigned historical statement in the handwriting of Bishop McTyeire. The document is presented as it is except that some changes have been made in punctuation and capitalization that it might be easier to read. Bishop Asbury is in error as to the age of Dr. Benson; but practically all the historical details of the letter are borne out by the records. This letter is probably the fullest and frankest statement he ever made concerning his problems and difficulties in America.

and frequently called upon supplied for the travelling connexion, and travelled the first year nine or ten months, though less or more, I cannot say correctly, in the Staffordshire Circuit, (the Circuit in which I lived) to supply the place of William Orpe. The four Conference years that I travelled were in Bedford and Salsburg alternatively: from thence I came to America and am now on the forty-fifth year of my mission which will close next October the twentieth. I have been broken, breach upon breach by affliction, that I am at present completely superannuated, having past last August the twenty first, the first period of the life of man; and it has been for some years past a permanent sentiment with me that in such a case no man high in office, however great in qualifications, should stand in high responsibility in the Church of God; but rather retire and give place to younger and stronger men in body and mind, such is our Junior Superintendent, to whom I have ceded the presidential chair of every Annual Conference for these seven years past. It was also my pleasure when present, always to give Dr. Coke the president's chair. Glory to God, our houses are set in order. Our order of things is such that we have about fifty-five men presiding elders, that by terms of four years at farthest, yet movable at any time when the Episcopacy judge of the importance of the case. These presiding elders serve a probation of seven, or two seven years in large and very consequential Districts, and have their quarterly visitations of every circuit in their charge, preside in the quarterly meeting Conferences of the official department of the Local ministry, possibly in some large circuits of long standing that compose from sixty, eighty, or near an hundred members, and examine characters, try cases, admit and give authority to exhorters and local preachers, examine local preachers and local deacons for election and ordination to Deacon and Elders office in the Annual Conferences. These Presiding Elders [who pre-



side] in the absence of a Bishop, and rule well, are counted worthy of double honour. In the absence of a Bishop (appointed by him, if not appointed, to be elected by the Conference) to preside in; and do the business of the Annual Conference; and we have the pleasure to believe that such is their age and improvement that we have not only half a dozen but a dozen, if called to preside in an Annual Conference, would do it with ease, dignity and correctness, assisted by their brethren the presiding elders. If a Bishop at any distance where mail can go, has consequential business to the whole Conference, he has only to communicate to one man, he to write to the rest of the presiding elders, they to communicate to the men who have charge of Stations and Circuits: the work is done. Bishops in Greece or Rome—what have they been in frightful forms! What have they been? men or fiends! Bishops in our age, among the Presbyterians and Independent churches, the Baptists and the commonalty of the people are ready to suppose that a Bishop is a tyrant, the same as a pope, dreadful, dangerous creatures. Possibly some very wise men with all their Hebrew, Greek, & Latin have not found out the pure derivation of that word. It is very near to a perfect German word, in both consonants and vowels, admitting the German pronunciation and the English pronunciation to differ. Bi-schoft, the chief minister. With us a bishop is a plain man altogether like his brethren, wearing no marks of distinction, advanced in age, and by virtue of his office can sit as president in all the solemn assemblies of the ministers of the Gospel, and many times, if he is able, called upon to labour and suffer more than any of his brethren. No negative or positive, in forming church rules, raised to a small degree of constituted and elective authority above all his brethren, and in the executive department, power to say, "brother that must not be, that cannot be," having full power to put a negative or a positive in his high charge

of administration, and even in the Annual Conferences to correct the body or any individuals that have transgressed, or would transgress and go over the printed rules by which they are to be governed; and bring up every man and every thing to the printed rules of order as established in the form of Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. It is an established maxim with us that if a man is not well taught and practiced in obedience to know how to serve, he will never know how to command or be fit to take any office in the Church of God, and that stubborn disobedient men must be mended, though it will take much time and more labour.

Several brethren among us have sincerely wished that there could be some mode of communication and union such as can take place considering distance and circumstances, and administration and order, between us and the parent society. We have hoped it would be for the best, then we have feared we should not find safe hands to put our business into the British Conference to conduct, and the misunderstandings and misinterpretations might bring us into trouble and bring on a greater separation. And I can truly say for one, that the greatest affliction and sorrow of my life was, that our dear Father from the time of the Revolution to his death, grew more and more jealous of myself and the whole American connexion: that it appeared we had lost his confidence almost entirely. But he rigidly contended for a special and independent right of governing the chief minister or ministers of our order, which in our judgment went not only to put him out of office, but remove him from the continent to elsewhere that our Father saw fit; and that, notwithstanding our constitution, and the right of electing every church officer, and more especially our Superintendent. Yet we were told, *not till after the death of Mr. Wesley*, our constitution could have its full operation. For many years before this time we lived in peace and trusted in the confidence and

friendship of each other. But after the Revolution we were called upon to give a printed obligation which here follows, and which could not be dispensed with—it must be: “During the life of the Rev. Mr. Wesley, we acknowledge ourselves his sons in the Gospel, ready in matters belonging to church government, to obey his commands. And we do engage after his death, to do everything that we judge consistent with the cause of religion in America, and the political interests of these states to preserve and promote our union with the Methodists in Europe.” Our people and preachers were coming out of their childhood, they thought for themselves—if the obligation was necessary, why not introduced in former years, in better times? Matters are strangely changed—much blood has been shed—the mind of the citizens of the United States and the United Kingdoms, must be exceedingly changed, and soured against each other, and the state of things will never be as it has been between the two countries. Some said, the citizens of both countries are so much alike, we shall have war again in ten, twenty, or thirty years. Foreigners by thousands coming to our country and cursing their own, pushing themselves into office and blowing the coals of strife, magnifying small offences, raising mountains out of mole hills—a word and a blow stricken by wicked and imperious officers that don’t know their duty, putting to death a most ancient and noble British character; and a grand and noble, and generous and affable American character dying swiftly:—and yet both sides crying out “if you cannot lead us, you shall not drive us,” and both sides going to driving us hard as they can with fire and sword.

Mr. Wesley is to this day, and always has been, his memory respected and loved by hundreds and thousands in America, as a great apostolic man, and hundreds of children continually named after him, yea thousands. In America some of our enemies knew that of all the good men and holy men, that our dear John the divine of Lon-

don, and John the divine of Madeley, at the time of the Revolution, had written more on worldly affairs than any Gospel men in Europe or America. I spare the dead: and yet I think that a degree of justice is due to the memory of such a man as John Wesley. I perfectly clear him in my own mind, and lay the whole blame of the whole business upon Diotrephes, late of the Tower of London. Little did I think that we had such an enemy, that had the continual ear and confidence of Mr. Wesley. This I believe from good testimony, eye, and ear witnesses, who some years after when they saw that my mind was so deeply affected that I did not get clear of it for some years after Mr. Wesley's death: Doctor Coke and John Harper told me what they had seen and heard, and known, and felt. Doctor Coke said that "as oft as Mr. Wesley went to see Diotrephes he came back with his mind strangely agitated and dissatisfied with the American connexion; that he did not know what to do to put him to rights." And the counsel of Diotrephes in a full conference was in substance this—if he (Diotrephes) had the power and authority of Mr. Wesley he would call Frank Asbury home directly. John Harper was the man who was present in the Conference and heard this advice given, and told me several years after in America with his own mouth. Yet I spare the dead, and must write the truth, that he, Diotrephes, wrote to the Wesleys for counsel and advice in our critical situation—advice which we thought truly apostolic and worthy of the ministers of the Gospel of the Son of God; in substance, was to give as little offence as possible either to Jew or Gentile or the Church of God; to have nothing to do with the affairs of this world if we could help it, and mind the business of our spiritual calling. Diotrephes made this instruction pretty public among the preachers and the people, and then they charged him with violating every part of it. He was positive beyond description that the Americans should be

brought back to the old government, and that immediately; it appeared to me that his object was to sweep the continent of every preacher that Mr. Wesley had sent to it, and every respectable preacher from Europe who had graduated among us, whether English or Irish. He told us if we returned to our native country we would be esteemed as such obedient loyal subjects that we should obtain ordination in the grand Episcopal Church of England, and come back to America with high respectability after the war was ended. Francis did not believe it, and he possessed a senior right after the removal of Boardman and Pilmoor, and God had given him souls for his hire, and souls for his charge among the people; and a number of eminent preachers both travelling and local, wanted nothing but a man to go in and out before them to give them, if he had not books, order and discipline by the word of mouth. Francis thought as he had possession 'twas best to hold it, especially when abundance of respectable members said, "Will you leave us? Will you leave us?" And it was the general language of the American people and preachers, that those preachers from Europe who were dissatisfied with the measures of the country, had better go home. At the death of Mr. Wesley two of his European disciples, one asked, who will preach his funeral sermon? Who will write his life? They corrected themselves by saying, Mr. Wesley has written his own life better than any other man can write it; and O that it had been so, or that if anything had been done, it had been after the model of the life of the Vicar of Madeley, compiled by Joseph Benson, which life has been made an unspeakable blessing to my mind in reading it. It has been pressed with great weight upon my mind for several years that it was my indispensable [duty] to write to some person in London or elsewhere, a true and correct account, because I think that Mr. Wesley has been reproached beyond anything that was thrown upon him before that



period, by the London writer of his life. You will examine as an early contemporary of the Oxford Methodists and the last branch of that order, you will see in substance that with respect to the American ordination, that Mr. Wesley is represented as invading and usurping all Church order; and yet the author grants if Mr. Wesley had been elected and chosen by the American preachers and people, it would have been in Gospel order and proper. Did that author know, or was he ignorant? Why did he write in the dark? When the people of Mr. Wesley's charge in America, many thousands, under total privation of the ordinances of God, most of the Episcopalians had deserted their stations and churches from almost every part of the continent. The Presbyterians held no open communion—the Methodists could not become Presbyterians in sentiment—they would not be Baptists—neither Independents. When the preachers first came to the continent with what affection they were received! Multitudes came forward as constant hearers and members of the society; and immediately the tables of the Lord in their former churches were closed against them. When our brethren would say, "O that you had been ordained to administer the ordinances of God to us," it was of no account to say, the Episcopal Bishops would not ordain us. "Mr. Wesley should have ordained you." And thus for fourteen or fifteen years, hundreds and thousands of preachers and people crying continually. Universal election to Mr. Wesley to ordain ministers for America; because he was as we believe, an apostolic man, admitting upon trial and into connexion the preachers of his charge, governing and stationing every one of them, that he came short only in ordination. Now Sir, I submit to you, if Doctor Whitehead's life of Mr. Wesley, if there is power and authority in any part of your body, in justice to Mr. Wesley (asking no mercy) when called upon by hundreds and thousands for so long a

time to exercise the third branch of apostolic power in ordination, and that hundreds and thousands, preachers and people, have blessed and praised God for the wisdom given to Mr. Wesley and to the Baltimore General Conference in 1784 to form upon such pure principles a truly Apostolic Church, the success which has attended the labours of its ministers, we must say that Doctor Whitehead's history must be corrected according to the testimony, or suppressed; as containing a defamation of that man of God, John Wesley, and the whole body of American Methodists. We feel determined to stand in Apostolic order and gospel ground. Acts 13th ch. Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them, and with double fasting and prayer they laid their hands on them. And Acts 14:23 a distinct name, office and order—Elders in the Church of God. Acts 6:6. Never, sure, was any man for so many years called upon to ordain ministers for America—Never, sure, could a people be so overjoyed and conform so universally as with one heart and one mind—that is what we wanted and requested from year to year, and we have obtained it at last, bless God, and bless Mr. Wesley.

We do not suffer one officer in the Church of God to assume or invade the rights of another. A licensed exhorter to be always attempting to preach—a travelling or local preacher must not baptize without ordination—a Deacon travelling or local administer the Lord's supper but under the order of an Elder. On no account will we suffer the Elders to ordain alone, but to come forward when called upon by the Bishop in names and numbers to assist in the ordination of Elders. We do not suffer our presiding elders to invade any singular rights and privileges of the Episcopacy.

This simple method which we have followed from the beginning in managing our temporal affairs: Our stewards



are elected in every conference; they call first on every preacher belonging to the Conference to know what they have received for quarterage in the stations and Districts where they have laboured the past year; by doing this they come immediately to a sight, what preachers have already received their full demand, and what preachers are deficient according to our rules of Discipline. Then they call for all the collections that have been brought in, with 200 Dolls pr Conference from the book interest, and 140 Dolls from the chartered fund. Small matters! and the dividend must be made among twelve Conferences in the year instead of nine.

We send you our mite subscription to see what additional wonders we can perform by the blessing of God: especially when we have such accounts from your side of the water, of all the churches who have been maintaining a local ministry are sending out travelling ministers to the ends of the Earth. We wish them success in the name of the Lord, they are coming right at last. But hail Wesleys! Hail Oxford Methodists!—who seventy years ago formed an apostolic society, and sent forth travelling preachers in apostolic order. Blessed be God for a number of simple men; and making every improvement in doctrine and order from the Oxford Methodists, were directed to establish an apostolic church, and to put the government in the hands of travelling preachers; and yet at the same time, as there must be men that cannot always continue to travel, and others that sincerely wish but have it not in their power to travel, may be as useful as possible and enjoy all their rights and privileges in their local state—and the travelling ministry hold sacred, and make the very best use of all their superior privileges. And concerning ordination that it ought to be held sacred and considered as the helm of good order. We believe in every age of the church it has been, and now is held sacred. We have heard of a few simple people here and there

hardly being worthy of being members of the church, pleading their right to sit down with each other if it was every day and receive and administer the Lord's supper one to another, therefore we conclude that churches and societies ought to examine well what bearing their sayings and doings will lead to, whether they will introduce division and confusion, or unity and good order in the Church of God, in the body of Christ.

Will you, my dear Sir, do what you can at this late period of life as our Agent to the British Conference—and if you please, call a confidential and younger man to your assistance? Will you examine well any letters or communications from America, and judge how far it may be proper to print any of them in the United Kingdoms; and where and in what manner any difficulties may be explained, and methods of gospel order be brought into operation. We have planted, we have watered, we have taken a most sacred charge of Upper and Lower Canada for about 22 years. They form two respectable Districts in the Genesee Conference. They lie side by side on the Northern banks of the St. Lawrence, and the United States Districts and Circuits on the South. The souls of our people in Canada are exceedingly precious to us—they are a willing people, prompt to pay their preachers—they say “tell us what to do, and we will do it.” Exclusive of the most ancient, who came from various parts of Europe, the additional and increasing inhabitants now, of both provinces are multitudes of refugees from the United States at the time of the Revolution. Many others have preferred the provinces to the United States, and there are at this time large family connexions on both sides of the line, and many preachers that have changed and interchanged. The manner in which Montreal was taken possession of, and is now held, will not, cannot be dispensed with by the General Conference, by the Annual Conference, nor by the presiding elders of Lower Canada.

Thomas Birch, one of his Majesty's subjects late from Ireland, was sent to Montreal in the very moment of time, just at the commencement of the war, and was permitted to stay a year longer than our constitution grants (the state of the case justifying it) and returned to the States with an honourable recommendation from the Society. That Saml. Montgomery should be sent with the greatest expedition six hundred miles to supply the place of Thomas Birch—that Samuel, one of his Majesty's subjects late from Ireland, should be prevented from taking his charge by the British missionary! And who is to examine Mr. Williams's conduct? Mr. Bennett of the provinces of Nova Scotia? The British Conference? or the directors of the missionary society? Henry Ryan, Presiding Elder of Lower Canada, made a visit to Montreal by order of the Bishops and Genesee Conference: he has obtained testimonies which will be handed forward to the Agent of our affairs presented in their order. We as ministers of Christ think it a sin of sins to divide the body of Christ. There was special caution given to Thomas Birch, Samuel Montgomery, and Henry Ryan; and we have good reason to believe that possibly two thirds of the Society in Montreal would put themselves under the government of the American connexion. But we shall bear long, suffer long, make every explanation till the charge is given up to us. Whether the thing has been done through ignorance or through the influence of wicked and designing men. We shall give our fathers and brethren time to inform themselves, and time to correct their conduct. For we are sure that our Episcopacy would never act so out of order as to send a preacher to take possession of a charge so consequential, under the oversight of the parent connexion; and yet in this business we would touch that venerable body, or any authoritative part of it, with the tenderness of a feather dipt in oil. Respected Brother, may our Pre-

siding Elders address their letters to you, when cases of a singular nature shall occur? At present Francis, your friend, with great difficulty has dictated this letter. One thing more. Upon this continent we are crowded with French people, like polite heathens and barbarians to us. We want French Methodist preachers—despairing of obtaining any from the travelling connexion, since we have read your reports, our only hope is that some of our local brethren from Jersey or Guernsey will come over and help us. We have employed an accomplished young Frenchman of an extensive acquaintance with the French Methodists in those Islands, to see if such a man as we want can be obtained. And can you aid in this matter? It is our wish that a preacher that is willing to come to America, to be well recommended by his brethren that know him, to our Agent, Mr. Benson, on whose recommendation we shall depend.

My love and a thousand thanks to Mr. Blanshard for the Minutes, to Mr. Marsden for the reports, hoping they will continue their goodness from year to year. Let them direct to any part of the United States, to myself, or the Junior Bishop or Bishops, whose names will be known upon the Minutes of our Conference. And should our Father and Brother Benson, have any special call and communication to make, be sure to make it to one of the presiding elders, and the business will be taken up we hope in good order. Instructions will be given by the Bishops to the Presiding Elders that they may be called to write to the Agents of our American affairs in London or elsewhere, and possibly to be written to from the men of our confidence in Europe.

And now may the God of all grace, with his eternal Son and ever blessed Spirit, be with us through time and for ever and ever. Amen.

FRANCIS ASBURY.

I, Thomas Mason who wrote this letter, salute my fathers and brethren in the Lord.

*P. S. To Bishop Asbury's letter to the Rev. Joseph Benson.*

Mr. Wesley could not come himself to America, but he sent one that was well qualified. Dr. Coke & myself was so liberal as to submit ourselves to an election before Francis was ordained on his office as Bishop & Superintendent, at the first Gen. Conference in Baltimore, December 1784. Dr. Coke, notwithstanding his visits were transitory, was very useful as a divine, & as a classical man. He was greatly esteemed by hundreds & thousands in America, his writings will be read with attention, his memory will be precious—the Americans knew his worth not only his labours & travels, but by necessity oft compelled to take up with very mean lodging as Francis who generally attended him, & many others can witness, through some of the extreme parts of our country & at a very early settlement. Add to this that at every visit he had to cross and re-cross the Atlantic. 'Tis true Dr. Coke had his troubles in America & it is as true that Francis Asbury had his troubles, & we heard that Mr. Wesley had his troubles & no wonder when he was told & possibly made to believe that no sooner had he granted the Americans what they wished than they declared themselves independent of him. Had we not lived in all good confidence & fellowship for fifteen years, no complaint on our side, no complaint that we heard of from Mr. Wesley? Why then should our generous minds be called to enter an obligation which we never had violated and I believe there was no intention to violate? And I must believe that the Americans were the greatest friends Mr. Wesley had through Europe or the world, they had read all his books that came to hand, they had heard of all his excellencies, his labours, sufferings, and success, and who with them but Mr. Wesley almost every large & steady family among



them of the old disciples must have a Wesley among the children. Francis had been charged & perhaps very properly to be a man of gloomy mind, and sometimes a prophet of evil tidings concerning ministerial men, but many of his brethren after proper trial have confessed if they were evil they were true in the end. Mr. Wesley wrote concerning Diotrephes, honest George & Francis, "you three be as one, act by united councils." But who was to do that with Diotrephes? Francis had a prior right of government by special order and letter from Mr. Wesley a few months after he had been in the country, and if he could not exercise it in the cities, where the first missionaries that came over were located by necessity, having no proper men to change with them, yet Francis in the country endeavored to do the best he could. Matters did not fit well between Diotrephes & him & poor Francis was charged with having a gloomy mind & being very suspicious & so & so. It would be presumed because Francis was a little heady that Diotrephes wrote to Mr. Wesley to "call Francis home immediately." Be it as it might, Mr. Wesley wrote such a letter to Francis, and Francis wrote in answer that he would prepare to return as soon as possible whatever the sacrifice might be. Then Diotrephes said you cannot go, you must not go—your labours are wanted here. Francis said Mr. Wesley has written for me, I must obey his order. Diotrephes said "I will write to Mr. Wesley & satisfy him." Shortly after came a letter from Mr. Wesley to Francis in substance, "You have done very well to continue in America & help your brethren when there was such a great call." And now my dear Father and Brother, I know not a man in the British connexion to write to. These are the children of 45 or 50 years, you are the man & were the Father when they were children. I leave these things with you to make any use, or no use of them. I have confidence in you that you will not make a bad use of them.

APPENDIX B <sup>1</sup>A LETTER FROM BISHOP COKE TO THE NEW YORK  
CONFERENCE

Falmouth  
County of Cornwall,  
England  
Jan. 6, 1806

My very dear Brethren,

I have received your official Letter, and sit down to vindicate myself, as I value your esteem very much. But it will be almost impossible for me to do so to your full satisfaction, unless you give me credit concerning my motives—concerning the movements of my heart, as far as I am acquainted with them, and the views and intentions of my mind.

I then in the first place, declare to you, that I have a strong and unfeigned love towards you all, and that the interests of the cause of God among us in the United States of America, cleave very closely to my heart, and are a subject of my daily prayers.

In the second place, I highly venerate Bishop Asbury, and consider him as a Second Father instrumentally of the work among us in the United States. (Excuse me for using the word *us*, for I still consider myself as one of you.) I must therefore beg (and I claim it from your candor) that nothing I shall say in my own defence, may be considered as in the least degree as disrespectful to him; as I consider him as acting according to the will of the General Conference in every thing which relates to me,

<sup>1</sup> The original of this excellent letter, in the handwriting of Dr. Coke, is in the valuable collection of manuscripts of Drew Theological Seminary, Madison, N. J. It is printed through the courtesy of that institution. It shows the refined feeling and Christian character of Dr. Coke, and is, also, an excellent side light upon the character of Francis Asbury.



as well as in all his Episcopal labors. I now proceed to my vindication.

About ten or eleven years ago, the General Conference voted that *the Episcopacy needed to be strengthened*. The debate was remarkably solemn and affecting; and I was moved by my ardent love of the work, to offer myself to you as a Coadjutor with Bishop Asbury, *for the strengthening of the Episcopacy*. Many were the prayers put up, and many and solemn were the reciprocal engagements entered into at that time.

Either that day or the next, Bishop Asbury proposed to me a plan of operations—I was to visit Albany, Vermont, and the whole of the New England States, as far as our work then extended in those parts, taking Philadelphia, New York, and, if I pleased, the Peninsula, in my way, and to meet Bishop Asbury in the Spring in some part of New England. I was astonished. I did not see in this plan anything which related in the least degree to my being a Coadjutor in the Episcopacy, or serving to strengthen it; though it was for that purpose, as the primary point, that it was thought eligible by the General Conference that I should reside for life in America. Bishop Asbury was to hold the three Southern Conferences entirely by himself; and I was to spend my whole time *merely* as a Preacher; and on a plan, upon which I should spend the chief part of my time in preaching to very few. The Northern States would be covered with snow. I should have Mountains of snow to ride over, only preach in general (a few Towns excepted) to the Family where I was, and a few of their neighbours. When Bishop Asbury retired, I fell on my face before God, and said, “O my God, what have I done?” Some of the Presiding Elders came to me afterwards to form my Plan, and I was still more convinced, that, according to the whole plan, I was to be nothing but a *mere* Preacher. However, I was solemnly engaged; and though *you* had

not yet in any degree complied with *your* part of the engagement, I was determined to move on, even in that small sphere of usefulness. But a short time before the General Conference broke up, came the Minutes of the British Conference, appointing me to preside in Ireland the ensuing year. This was done after I sailed for America. I had promised the Irish Conference, when I was at that Conference, that if I was so appointed, I would be with them, God willing. This point I laid immediately before the General Conference, and they unanimously judged that I ought to fulfill my engagement with the Irish Brethren. I then proposed to Bishop Asbury to accompany him to the three Southern Conferences, and to sail for Ireland from Charleston. We accordingly went together; but to my astonishment I was not consulted in the least degree imaginable concerning the station of a single Preacher. I did not expect or wish to be any thing more than a Chamber-Council, the ultimate decision in every thing still to remain with Bishop Asbury. In short, I neither said nor did any thing during the whole tour, which had any usefulness attending it, as far as I can judge, but preach.

When I went to Europe, I fulfilled my engagements in Ireland, and took a solemn leave of every Society in my tour, and of the Irish Preachers in their Conference. The British Conference being to be held in about a fortnight afterwards, I went to that Conference to take my final leave of the British Brethren. Four times they brought my case before them, before they could prevail on me to take over an address from them for my return to Europe till the next General American Conference. But I informed them of the solemnity of my engagements in the fullest manner. I then returned to the States: but the length of the voyage, my capture by the French, &c. put it out of my power to visit more than two of the Conferences. Indeed, I visited but one—the Virginia

Conference. Bishop Asbury and the Members of that Conference were unanimously of opinion, that I might return to Europe till the General Conference and that the General Conference, in the circumstances in which I was placed, would not disapprove of my conduct. Still to my astonishment I was not consulted in the least degree whatever concerning the station of a single Preacher, & had nothing I know of peculiarly useful to do, but to preach. But what astonished me, I think I may say, almost above expression, was the following mysterious circumstance—Bishop Asbury was at that time so weak in body, that he could not reach Charleston in time to attend the Southern Conference, & therefore did not go. I offered my service, as it would have been equally the same for me to have sailed from Charleston as from New York. But he refused me, & appointed Brother Jackson to station the Preachers, & Brother Jesse Lee to sit as Moderator in the Conference. I knew not how to account for this in any manner consistently with your most solemn engagements at the General Conference.

The next General Conference came. I confess to you, my dear respected Brethren, I was afraid, considering all the circumstances already mentioned, that if you kept me with you, you would render me comparatively useless. I therefore previously accepted of the address of the British Conference concerning me, but was determined to submit to the vote of the General Conference. When I came, the General Conference after two days' consideration allowed me to return, principally on account of the Irish Mission. But I surprised—I was astonished that you entered into no explanation concerning our *reciprocal* engagements: for during my whole stay at this time, I was not even consulted in the least degree on any thing belonging to the Episcopacy. I did indeed lay hands on a few who were ordained, & that was every thing.

When I last returned to America, I did expect from

Bishop Asbury's letters, as well as from letters written by several of the Preachers, that you really had entered into my case, & did intend to employ me in some manner as a Bishop, so that I should have the opportunity of giving my judgment freely on all Episcopal matters. Under this impression I settled all my little affairs in England, & took with me nineteen chests, boxes, & trunks, containing all my papers, most important books, &c. (besides the copies of my Commentary which were packed in other cases) leaving only behind me that part of my Library which I should not immediately want, & which might be sent after me on my order; & also those copies of my Commentary which I was in hopes my British & Irish Brethren would sell for me. I had at the British Conference which was held just previous to my sailing, various severe struggles in my mind, whether I should take my solemn final farewell of my European Brethren or not. I did repeatedly give them strong reason to doubt whether they should ever see me again, & was faithful in repeating to them the solemn engagements I was under to you. But I accepted of their address as far as it concerned me merely from the uncertainty which still remained, whether you intended to employ me in America in any other way in reality than as a *mere* Preacher: and on no other ground could I have accepted of the address as an honest Man, though I greatly love & respect my European Brethren. However, when I arrived at Petersburg in Virginia, I made up my mind to stay with you, & had formed a Plan of visiting the North, & returning time enough of course to be at the General Conference. But, when I was at Brother Ellis's near Richmond, a thought struck me with amazing power, "You should go to Georgia, to meet Bishop Asbury at the Georgia Conference." The impression made on my mind by this thought, completely robbed me of a night's rest. In two

days I set off for Georgia. But how amazed I was to find, that every thing was in the same situation—that so far from my having any opportunity of strengthening the Episcopacy, according to your solemn engagements at the General Conference, when you accepted me as one of your Bishops, I was not to be consulted on the station of a single Preacher: nay, when I asked for a copy of the Stations of the Preachers at the close of the Georgia Conference, which was granted to every Travelling Preacher present, I was refused. I then saw the will of God concerning me—that I ought not to labour in America, unless the General Conference would consent to comply in some degree with its engagements. I did not want to station the Preachers as Bishop Asbury does. Nothing should be done to grieve that venerable Man: but I approve of the stationing the Preachers by a Committee at each Annual Conference with the Bishops at the head of it. But every Bishop ought to have a right of giving his judgment on every point, or he is but the shadow of a Bishop.

When Bishop Asbury & I arrived at Columbia, I opened my whole mind to him. I laid before him my situation in Europe—that I had there the superintendency of all the Missions—of the Missionaries in Ireland, Wales, the West Indies, Nova Scotia & New Brunswick, and Newfoundland. I have a Committee to assist me in the management of those Missions, for which I bless God. Every year I preside at the Irish Conference, & the Preachers are stationed by myself and a Committee of nine who are the Representatives of the Districts; only the Plan is afterwards brought before the Conference for their approbation. In England, I am always either the Secretary or President of the meeting of Representatives of Districts, who station the Preachers, and my judgment has considerable regard paid to it; as also in the Conference, when the Plan is brought before them for their consideration: and in all



these instances the Lord is pleased to render me useful. In Europe, I have incomparably more time for Literary matters than I could have in the United States. In respect to Preaching, I can preach in the year to three or four times the number of People I could preach to in the United States in the same time, from the compactness of the Circuits, and the crowded state of the Inhabitants. Now for me, I urged, to spend my life in America for nothing but *merely* to preach, would be to sacrifice so much of my usefulness, that it could not be agreeable to the will of God. Bishop Asbury acknowledged the force of my arguments; & requested me to visit New England before the General Conference, which I accordingly did, though, I candidly confess, with much secret reluctance of mind; as I should lose the opportunity of seeing my Brethren at the Virginia and Alexandria Conferences, which, as I had come to the South, I sincerely desired to do; & should also be obliged to travel very much indeed in the Mail-Coaches with very disagreeable company in order to accomplish the Plan, & thereby preach much seldomer than otherwise I should have done: but I complied without making the least objection. Perhaps, dear respected Brethren, you will now ask me, "Why did you offer yourself to us?" I answer, "It was your unanimous vote at the General Conference, that the Episcopacy needed to be strengthened." I had been consecrated by our venerable Father in the Gospel, the late Mr. Wesley, a Bishop particularly for America. I had been the means of establishing your present form of Church-Government, which in a general view, (tho' it will admit of improvements,) I prefer to any other, I consider your union as of infinite importance to the continuation of the present revival. Your continent includes about a third part of the Land of the World. When fully cultivated & peopled, it will contain & support, perhaps, a thousand millions of Inhabitants,

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most of whom, I expect, will speak the English language. To preserve, therefore, your union that the work of God may progress with the progress of population, & at last leaven the whole Continent, lies very near my heart. I know that I am perfectly unworthy of the honour of *merely* preaching in all your Pulpits; but it is my duty to meet the calls of God, however unworthy I may be. If you consider my living & labouring among you, will help to preserve this union, I shall think it the highest honour & happiness of my life so to do.

My precious Wife can travel under the Divine blessing five thousand miles a year, and I can travel ten thousand. But considering the circumstances before mentioned, it is my duty to have some explanation from you, before I come. I cannot come to you as a *mere* Preacher. As to my Circular Letter I recall it entirely, acknowledging that I laid down conditions which were not included in our reciprocal engagements. But I did not see things when I wrote it, as I do now. I hardly knew what to write, circumstanced as I was in respect to you: and you surely, my respected Brethren, must be conscious that an explanation of some kind is really necessary. Am I to come to you in any sense as a Bishop, & in what sense? I don't wish to act, if I come, but in perfect subordination to the General Conference, but yet still as a Bishop, & having a right to give my judgment in all Episcopal matters, unless I render myself unworthy of the Office. Do write to me, my dear Brethren, as soon as you have received this Letter. Send me Duplicates; one by the British Packet from New York, paying the postage to New York; otherwise it will not be sent off; and another by the first merchant ship; in which case, I believe I shall hear from you before the next British Conference sits, which I particularly desire to do. And now I leave this whole business in the hands of God & you. Pray for us. To God's most holy keeping I com-



mit you. May your blessed work flourish more & more;  
& your own hearts be ever full of Divine love.

I am, my very dear Friends, & Brethren,

Yours very affectionately & faithfully,

THOMAS COKE.

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